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# LIFE CLASS

## CAST

JIM HEPWORTH.....a retired anaesthetist.

AILEEN HEPWORTH.....his wife, once a journalist.

SUE HEPWORTH.....their daughter, a Phys. Ed  
teacher.

PEGGY HEPWORTH.....their younger daughter, a  
clerk.

NICK BROWN.....an advertising copywriter.

## THE GUIDE

Era: 1980.

Country: Australia.



## ACT ONE

### SCENE ONE:

*This scene staged with minimum propping. Spot-lit stage left, a sign reading REALITY INSTITUTE with bench beneath. On bench sits NICK, 42, average appearance, casual clothes.*

*[The GUIDE enters right, an elderly man or woman who gives an impression of impartiality, inner containment.]*

GUIDE: Mr Brown?

*[NICK nods, jerks up.]*

Please come through.

NICK: Not easy to find your door.

GUIDE: Yes, it's difficult to find.

*Crossfade to bluish spot stage centre. Nothing but a simple desk with one drawer and two plain chairs - top-lit for dramatic effect. Near the desk is a weathercock (on a stand like a light stand) and a traditional signal box lever (mounted on a flat base on the floor). GUIDE indicates chair in front of desk. NICK sits.*

GUIDE: You were recommended by..? *[He moves around to sit behind his desk.]*

NICK: No one. I saw your ad.

GUIDE: Interesting. We don't advertise. *[Smiles, contemplates him.]*  
Perhaps you found us because you have a need.

NICK: Can that happen?

GUIDE: Sometimes. So! We begin with the basic question. What do you want?

NICK: To do something about my life.

GUIDE: Not simple, I'm afraid. [*Stands and begins to slowly pace the stage, in an out of the light.*] People can't *do* anything. They're done. People can't think anything. They're thought.

NICK: You mean... everything just... happens?

GUIDE: Yes. All our thoughts, emotions, acts, are the result of external or internal shocks.

NICK: You're saying we're just reactions?

GUIDE: Yes. But tell people that and you affront them. Because to move from reaction to response means the personality has to die. Psychological death.

NICK: Not good for the ego.

GUIDE: The precious ego. Our saddest form of self-defence.

NICK: U-huh. [*Gets up abruptly*] I think I should go.

GUIDE: Your choice entirely. But you won't find the door again.

NICK: [*Hesitates, half way out, turns.*] Look, I'm in deep shit here. Disaster zone. Cock up everything I try. Lousy at relationships. Always say the wrong things and...

GUIDE: React? Like then?

NICK: All I know is... my life's going nowhere.

GUIDE: Yes. And where do you think it should it go?

NICK: Well. Somewhere.

GUIDE: A common misconception. Life's a substrate. Neutral. Like a tree. A tree isn't good or bad. It doesn't take sides or commit adultery. It's never impatient. It's just a tree.

NICK:                    [*Confused, desperate.*] What I see is... what I see is... I go round in bloody circles. Go nowhere. It's ridiculous. I mean... There has to be more than this.

GUIDE:                   [*Guides him back to the chair.*] And there *is*, if you can find it. Please sit down.

                              [*NICK reluctantly sits again. The guide moves behind him.*]

                              So. Sit quite still. Relax. [*He places his hands each sides of NICK'S head.*] And let's examine this life of yours.

## SCENE TWO:

*This scene also with minimum propping. Early morning glow. Sound of a stream and bird calls. Stage centre, the facade of a small tent now propped against the desk from last scene. A plastic tray near tent holds kitchen things, tins, bread rolls.*

*SUE, jogs in from stage right, breathing hard and slumps on her haunches. She is a fit attractive 40 in T-shirt, shorts, running shoes. She removes one shoe and empties out a stone as NICK, now in old shorts, clambers out of tent, half asleep.*

NICK:                    You're up. [*Stretches.*]

SUE:                     An hour ago. Thirty push-ups. Jog to the dam. Skinny-dip. And back.

NICK:                    Only masochists study Phys. Ed.

SUE:                     Only slobs sleep in.

NICK:                    I reckon your sun sign's squared by the health star.

SUE:                     Health star?

NICK:                    Alfalfa Centuri.

SUE:                     Smartarse. And don't knock exercise. [*She stands again.*] Keeps you fit, good looking and sane.

NICK: Scored the *first* two.

SUE: Fig. So you think I'm a brain-dead bimbo?

NICK: No, dear, he hastened to assure her, [*Yawns.*] you're a sweet, caring person I dote on. [*Gets up and follows her around the set wanting a hug but she avoids him.*] He paused as many wept, then added: You're nobly proportioned. But so are some municipal toilets. Enchanted by his sentiments, she melted in his arms.

SUE: I should never have got involved with an ad man. [*Kneels and fiddles with breakfast things.*]

NICK: A pimple on the bum of commerce.

SUE: We have *nothing* in common.

NICK: We're both primates. [*Finds plates.*]

SUE: Could you be a little less infuriating? This is supposed to be a pleasant holiday. [*Pours muesli.*]

NICK: Life's just pleasant enough to stop you cutting your throat. That's why babies cry when they're born.

SUE: Thanks for that warming insight. [*Adds milk to cereal, hands him plate.*] Organic muesli.

NICK: All food's organic. [*Starts eating.*]

SUE: [*Huffs.*] If you go on like this when we get there and I'll kill you. You're worse than Mum!

NICK: No one's worse than your mum. Besides, I'm the only one she talks to.

SUE: Because you egg her on.

NICK: I keep it light, bright and trite.

[*She blows across the rim of her bowl.*]

What're you doing?

SUE: Blowing off an ant.

NICK: Why? You just trod on a hundred.

SUE: If I did, it was unintentional. And motivation's the first rule of morality. My father wrote a book called '*All that Breathes*'. It says we should preserve all life.

NICK: We do. [*Reads off tin.*] Smoked Mussels. Preserved in oil.

SUE: You never stop stirring, do you?

NICK: We live in stirring times. [*Stirs his muesli with his spoon*] So, tell me, does nature preserve life? All those parasites and carnivores eating other things alive...

SUE: Stop it! Stop! We're not animals, for God's sake. We're humans. With ethics and ideals. Without those, civilisation dies.

NICK: This one's been dead fifty years. What's your point?

SUE: You say I don't think. I'm showing you I do.

NICK: You can't trot out two unrelated thoughts and call it a proof. It's like being present at the birth of speech.

SUE: God, you're a pain!

[*They eat frowning.*]

NICK: So, this time, I meet your baby sister. What's she like?

[*SUE groans and circles finger around her ear.*]

Some family, huh?

SUE: [*Close to tears.*] If we could just... have one good time together. Like normal people. So it... *is* like a family instead of... [*She takes rolls out of packet, puts them down.*] Bread rolls.

NICK: [*Rolls one.*] So it does.

SUE: Dope.

NICK: [*Strokes her hair.*] Was nice last night.

SUE: Even though I'm a mental midget. A commodity. Receptacle.

NICK: I never said that. And you enjoyed it. Well, *didn't* you?

SUE: [*Reluctantly.*] Yes.

NICK: We came together like rail-car couplings. [*Pause*] I just wrote a corporate doco on railcar couplings.

SUE: I've never seen a railcar coupling.

NICK: Mostly they just hold hands.

*[The lights dim and SUE freezes in position. NICK emphasised by rose spotlight, stands and addresses audience.]*

NICK: [*Laconic.*] Good evening. You're now viewing me on media world-wide because, for reasons that don't concern you, I've become... omnipotent. To prove it, when I clap, the lights across the world... will go out. [*Claps once*]

*[Blackout.]*

Now that you know what I can do, I intend to make a few changes. [*Claps once again.*]

*[Back to rose light instantly.]*

From this moment, the following applies:

One: As the underlying world problem is population growth, there'll be no more births for thirty years.

Two: Persons destroying endangered species will become instant liquid compost with the exception of Japanese whalers who'll be harpooned.

Three: All politicians receiving kickbacks will be processed into Spam and delivered to International Aid Abroad.

Four: These blights will self-destruct. Feral animals. Chain saws. Religious fanatics. And any surviving recordings of Stefan Grapelli.

I now return you to your regular program. [*As he moves to sit again where he was in same attitude he says to himself in normal voice:*] Wouldn't work. Just make things worse.

[*Rose light becomes what it was at start of scene.*]

SUE: Nick? Did you hear me?

NICK: Huh?

SUE: Where were you? I said I need to feel your *warmth*. But nothing comes back. And if people don't feel, there's nothing.

NICK: No envy, fear, hatred...

SUE: I don't like this conversation.

[*The lights go instantly to a cold blue-white as both freeze in whatever position they have reached. The GUIDE walks in from stage right and contemplates the scene.*]

GUIDE: Forgive me. But what I see here is a smart-arse and a dreamer who gets lost in his line of patter.

NICK: [*He moves out of position slightly and answers.*] I know. I miss every chance to shut up.

GUIDE: Because you live in just part of yourself. You're trapped in your clever head.

[*NICK shuts his eyes.*]

You all right?

NICK: Not really. You're analysing part of my life that hasn't even *happened* yet. I mean, it's insane. I mean, we don't *go* on the trip till tomorrow.

GUIDE: Well, we could always examine your past. But your future's just the result of it.

[*NICK shakes head sadly.*]

Don't despair. It wastes energy. Besides, your situation's no worse than most. Most people are tossed around like corks.

NICK: [*Gestures to the immobile SUE.*] I rave on because she's touchy.

With her, nothing you say is ever right. This time I've promised myself I'll keep it light.

GUIDE: Can a cork have an aim? Let's move on.

*[Nick jerks back to his original frozen position as the lights revert to camping scene colour. The GUIDE is gone. The two of them unfreeze and carry on.]*

SUE: ...and we've got to be there at four. Did you hear me? *[Points to roll.]* Are you going to eat that or not?

NICK: Observe. I'm applying jam. And the hands never left the wrists.

SUE: Can you be serious for a moment. *[Pause]* Nick?

NICK: Mm?

SUE: There's no good time to tell you this.

NICK: Tell me what?

SUE: I'm pregnant.

NICK: *[shocked]* Why?

SUE: God, you're impossible! Not why. How! *[Catches his glance.]* No, I didn't intend this but it's happened. And I'm watching you very carefully because a decent man's supposed to be delighted.

NICK: Right. Always be delighted. *[Gets up, moves away.]* Except this isn't a sitcom.

*[Her face goes rigid.]*

Look. We don't live with each other. I've had one failed marriage. I'm paying for a child...

SUE: And you're scared I'll get my hands on what's left.

NICK: *[Worried.]* I'll pay the medical costs.

SUE: To get rid of it? And if I don't? *[Gets up to confront him.]*

NICK: Well, I'll... I'll contribute, of course.

SUE: How magnanimous. Great hearted Nick. Who's ready to do anything - except marry me. Or be with me.

NICK: Just let me get used to this, okay?

*[Strained pause. She angrily starts packing things up.]*

So, are you going to tell your parents?

SUE: That depends entirely on *you*.

*[Instantly back to a cold blue-white as both freeze and the GUIDE is there once more.]*

NICK: *[Hands to his head, stamps around.]* Christ! She's pregnant? Christ!

GUIDE: *[Nods]* So, don't... like her enough to spend your life with her?

NICK: God, no! We'd drive each other bats.

GUIDE: I see. So let's move on. *[Turns to go off stage.]*

NICK: Look, I seem to be....

GUIDE: *[Turns back.]* Yes?

NICK: ...taking up a lot of your time.

GUIDE: Time is precious, I agree.

NICK: And I'm not sure I can pay for this.

GUIDE: True. It's not easy to pay. And, here, you have to pay in advance.

NICK: So can you tell me what it costs?

GUIDE: Everything you own. I don't mean money or possessions. It's more serious than that.

NICK: Then what do you pay with?

GUIDE: Yourself.

**SCENE THREE:**

*The living-room of the Hepworth's crumbling home, possibly in a rural area near a provincial city. While staging can be minimal or suggestive, a conventional set is outlined here for orientation. The impression of an overgrown garden seen through French windows up-stage centre. An open doorway downstage left leads presumably to upstairs bedrooms and an archway upstage right to the hall, kitchen and front door.*

*The desk from the first scene has been shifted to stage centre-left. On it are books and dirty crockery. Beside it is a worn office chair and wastebasket. A bookcase behind table is jammed with books, which are also stacked on the floor. A wicker chair, downstage-left near doorway. Stage right, a sofa with a sideboard behind it with phone and drink bottles. No matter how simple the eventual staging, it should signify a shambolic, neglected space. In this ramshackle mess dust is a noun, not a verb. Mid afternoon.*

*[Doorbell rings.]*

PEGGY: *[Off]* What is this? The Deaf Institute?

*[The sound of a door being kicked. A scuffling and muttering. Steps on gravel. PEGGY appears outside the French windows - a dumpy, 35-year-old holding battered suitcase. She has hunched shoulders, a stoop and tends to glance suspiciously sideward, rather than turn her head. Drab clothes, mousey hair and habitual belligerence make her seem far older than she is. She hits the top of the jamb while kicking the base, showing that she knows the house. This opens one side and she stomps into the room, dumps down the case and stares at the mess.]*

PEGGY: Well that's nice. That's typical. Not that I expected much. Not that I expected much. Filthy, filthy pigs. *[She sweeps dirty plate off table into waste-basket beside it.]*

*[AILEEN, her mother, enters from arch in time to see this. She has been attractive but is now a fading 70 with a drink like a fixture in her hand. She wears a soiled, low-cut wrap, dirty bed-socks. Her voice varies from a mock-queenly drawl to harsh and rapid abuse.]*

AILEEN: What, may I ask, are you doing? In my house? My house, do you

understand. *Do you understand?*

PEGGY: Filthy, filthy pigsty. Don't think I'm going to stay here. Alcoholic.

AILEEN: I've had one gin. Which is little enough for lunch.

PEGGY: Disgusting, filthy place. Disgusting, filthy woman.

AILEEN: Is that the way to speak to your dear mother? The cause of your arising? The blessed tripe that bore you?

PEGGY: [*Wipes office chair-back with finger.*] Disgusting. Don't know why I came. I'm not staying. Got better things to do.

AILEEN: Don't let me keep you, dear.

PEGGY: You're not a mother. You're a sewer!

AILEEN: Char-ming. [*Steps up to her, sniffs.*] Had beautiful weather? Or didn't you wash?

PEGGY: I don't listen to alcoholics.

AILEEN: [*Puts her glass on table.*] I kept the report, you know. The subject is prone to...

PEGGY: Leave me *alone*...

AILEEN: ...unpredictable behaviour and...

PEGGY: You're evil.

AILEEN: ...delusions. [*Steps forward, baiting her.*] De-lu-sions!

PEGGY: [*Agitated, backing up, picks up case and holds it like a fender.*] Don't you come near me. I'll hit you. I'll hit you. I'll hit you.

[*JIM enters from arch, a frail 75-year old wearing thick spectacles and a shapeless cardigan over old pants. He is has bad arthritis and uses a stick.*

JIM: What in hell are you up to now?

AILEEN: [*Mock-sweetly to JIM*] Peggy's here, dear.

JIM: [*Peers short-sightedly.*] Peggy? [*Crosses to PEGGY, about to kiss her,*

*then sees state she's in. To AILEEN:]* What have you done to her?

AILEEN: [*Aping him.*] 'What have you done to her?' The heart of gold speaks.

JIM: [*Turns on AILEEN.*] Leave my daughter alone.

AILEEN: Don't talk to me in that tone, or I'll rip your bloody cods off. Not that they're any good to you. [*Grabs her glass and exits through arch.*]

PEGGY: [*Yelling after her, bolder now she's gone.*] Sewer!

JIM: Peggy. Please. Try not to take it so personally. I know how you feel but...

PEGGY: You don't know how *anyone* feels.

JIM: Now, dear. That's not fair. You're transferring your resentment to me. You really mustn't let her upset you. You know what she's like. Can't you...

[*PEGGY rushes out through windows, leaving case on floor.*]

*Peg?* [*He half follows her out, then comes back into the room, shaking his head. He sits down in his swivel chair, upset, looks into middle distance, sighs.*]

[*The lights dim to rose spot centred on JIM. CRITO [NICK] enters slowly in white, Grecian robe and kneels at his feet.*]

JIM: Well, Crito. What a world.

CRITO: I agree it is evil, Socrates, and I wish you would consider what we should do.

JIM: Let us examine it together, dear fellow. Do we say one must never willingly do wrong? That is our view, is it not?

CRITO: Most certainly.

JIM: In that case, one must not even do wrong when one is wronged, which most people regard as justified.

CRITO: It would seem not.

*[Lights back quickly to normal as AILEEN enters through arch holding dripping book by one corner. CRITO has risen and is retreating quietly backward.]*

AILEEN: *[Heavy sarcasm.]* I do wish, heart's blood, that you'd refrain from placing your books on the edge of the sink. *[Drops dripping book into JIM'S lap.]*

JIM: *[Picks book up and drops it on floor.]* You drove her away. Now God knows what she'll do.

AILEEN: Tell someone who cares. *[Exits arch.]*

*[Lights dim to rose again as CRITO returns to kneel as before.]*

JIM: Tell me another thing, Crito. Ought one to do injuries or not?

CRITO: Surely not, Socrates.

JIM: And is it right to do an injury in retaliation as most people believe, or not?

CRITO: No! Never!

JIM: I can tell *you've* never been married!

*[CRITO rises and glides away backward. Lights up to normal.]*

JIM: *[Half tries to pick up the book but it's too painful to bend that far. Grunts as his back hurts. Pokes at book with his foot.]* Ruined. Everything in this house gets ruined.

*[Steps on gravel outside.]*

SUE: *[Off, muffled.]* Garden door's open. It's quicker this way.

*[SUE enters through French windows.]*

SUE: Hi, Dad. *[Hurries to him.]*

JIM: *[He gets up, delighted to see her.]* Hello, dear. *[They hug as NICK follows her in with two small cases.]* Nick! Someone I can talk to at last.

NICK: *[Puts cases down. Pumps JIM's hand.]* Good to see you. I'll just put

these in the room. [*Exits with cases.*]

JIM: Enjoy your holiday, dear?

SUE: Bit of a change from being the world's oldest Phys Ed teacher.

JIM: You look blooming.

SUE: You'll get on. Peg here, yet?

JIM: She was. Then your mother welcomed her home and she ran outside in a rage. Be a dear and see what you can do.

SUE: God! Mum! [*Goes back outside through windows to search for PEGGY.*]

[*NICK re-enters through doorway.*]

NICK: [*Bends to pick up book.*] Obviously a book you can put down. [*Lifts it.*] It's wet.

JIM: Well most books are rather dry.

[*NICK smiles, walks over to put book outside French windows where it can dry, comes back to JIM.*]

NICK: So how's every little thing?

JIM: No different. Chronic pain and chronic marriage.

NICK: You have the typical marriage.

JIM: [*Spreads hands to express that he doesn't understand.*]

NICK: You loathe each other.

JIM: [*Nods*] It's like living with a crow. A huge, black, heartless crow - waiting to peck your eyes out. It'll peck and peck, whether you're breathing or not. [*Sits heavily in his swivel chair.*] Nothing worse than an old journo on the piss. She's been toxic for years. Started when they fired her from *The Herald*.

NICK: So why not cut her loose?

JIM: Too late to begin again. If you hate each other long enough it becomes a counter-irritant. [*Hugs his back and grimaces.*] Bloody

arthritis. Strange how things contract. [*Does slow circles in his chair.*] My world's contracted to this chair. I mostly just sit here and rot.

NICK: Life - gift of imposition?

JIM: You are burdened with a facile mind.

NICK: Comes from years thinking up slogans. [*He points to his head.*] I'm more of a head-case than Hamlet.

JIM: "To be or not to be." Prefer HB myself. Anyway, you're better off than me. [*Picks up book.*] I wished to be noble in all my works so I read philosophy for years. To no avail. I've ended up a waste of space. [*Gets up again and moves around, trying to ease the pain.*] As for this bloody pain. Moving helps but it doesn't stop. Drains you like opening a vein. [*Grimaces.*] Which I'm starting to see as an increasingly enticing solution. Death has a lot going for it. Antidote to life. Takes the strain off the heart. What's your view on euthanasia?

NICK: They seem... nice young people.

JIM: Don't try to brighten me up. I'm permanently ...tarnished. [*Walks stiffly to the window.*] Once your body conks you might as well check out. Luckily, retired anaesthetists know precisely what to do.

NICK: Thought you were the champion of life at any cost. Sue said you wrote a book about it.

[*JIM shrugs.*]

NICK: And what about your famous invention - the ventilator thing that keeps the brain-dead breathing? What do they call it?

JIM: The veggie freshener. [*Staring through window.*] What the hell are they doing out there? [*Turns, hobbles back.*] No I don't regret that. We're still living off the royalties.

NICK: So do you think there's an afterlife?

JIM: Like an afterbirth? [*Smiles.*] No. We die. That's it.

NICK: I envy you.

JIM: Why? [*Sits again in his favourite chair.*]

NICK: [Serious.] I'd love to believe death's the end. But I'm not that optimistic.

[AILEEN enters from arch - strikes pose there for NICK.]

AILEEN: Nicky wick-y!

NICK: Speak of the unspeakable....

AILEEN: Ooooo. Oooooooo..... [She twinkle-toes to him batting her eyelashes and holding forward her hand for him to kiss. They are both on the same wavelength of irreverence.] How's me fart young smeller?

NICK: [Clicks into his play-up-to-Aileen mode.] How utterly charming to see you.

AILEEN: I spotted you standing there out of the corner of my eye.

NICK: You have square eyes?

AILEEN: I'm no square, lover. I'm the advanced course. [Bumps him with her hip.] Ever tripped over a branch?

JIM: You don't have to be lewd. [Swings chair around to window.]

AILEEN: Leeeewd! Would I say something leeeewd? Oooo hush my mouth. [To NICK:] Didn't he offer you a drink? The usual?

NICK: Thanks.

AILEEN: Be lucky. Think I drank it all. [Kicks something out of her way.] Dooo forgive the mess but my cleaner seems confined to his chair. [Exits arch.]

JIM: [Looking through French window.] Here they come. Brace yourself. I shouldn't apologise for my daughters but Peggy's not right in the head. That's all you need to know.

[SUE comes back in through the French windows, leading PEGGY by the hand.]

SUE: She was down at the bottom of the garden beside Mum's favourite tree. [To PEGGY] Silly thing. But we've had a good talk. She's decided to stay. Haven't you, Peg?

PEGGY: [Regally.] I may.

JIM: [Rises and puts his arm around her.] That's my girl. Don't let your mother get the best of you.

PEGGY: Then I may not. It depends.

SUE: Peg. This is Nick.

PEGGY: Oh yes? [To NICK, arch.] I've heard things about you - not all good.

JIM: How it going at the Foundation, Peg?

PEGGY: I'm still employed, if that's what you mean.

JIM: Good girl.

SUE: [To NICK.] She works at the Outreach Foundation office.

NICK: That's financed by one of our clients.

PEGGY: Maggie Taggett?

NICK: Right.

PEGGY: They call her Maggot. Pretends she's pure but she's dis...gusting. Married with a man on the side. I don't know who it is, yet. But I'll find out. I always do.

[NICK looks uncomfortable and we suspect him.]

SUE: Come on, Kiddo. I want you to help me in the kitchen.

PEGGY: Don't order me around. I'm not your slave. First, I have to put my bag away. Then... and only then... if I *decide* if I feel like assisting you, I will. [Lifts bag and exits door.]

NICK: [To Sue.] I'll help.

SUE: No. You're more use here. [Exits doorway left.]

JIM: She wants you to keep the peace. [Subsides back into his chair.]

NICK: Will. If I can find it. [Sits on sofa.]

AILEEN: [Comes back from arch with drinks, hands NICK his.] Nup. Usual's

off, love. So I've made you a lobotomy cocktail. Double-vodka swimming in gin with a nip of scotch and balsamic.

NICK: Uh-huh? [*Takes cautious sip, grimaces.*]

AILEEN: Now. One swallow won't make a summer....

[*NICK tries it again to shut her up. Breathes out to cool his throat.*]

NICK: Subtle drop. Unblock a drain.

AILEEN: Knew you'd love it. So... how's the sausage warmer?

[*NICK pretends not to understand.*]

Shall I rephrase that, dear, to match your delicate sensibilities? How's the jig-a-jig with sweet-and-sour Sue?

JIM: [*To Aileen.*] Don't start on him.

AILEEN: Oooo! Did my husband speak? Oooo! He's an intellectual, don't you know. Head stuffed with rubbish in its most potent form. If you put an angle-grinder through his skull, the hot air'd give you third-degree burns. For, without him, he fondly surmises, the cows wouldn't lay and the hens would cease to give milk. Personally... personally... I'd like shove a bomb under him - then stand cheerily by to watch his... energetic... disassembly.

JIM: [*To AILEEN*] Quite finished? Then perhaps you'll consider the family for a moment and...

AILEEN: Did he mention family? Oooo! Oooo! Which family would that be? [*Finger to chin.*] But soft! I remember. Two dopey daughters. One who's hysterical and thinks she's the centre of the universe. One who's a couple of roos short in the top paddock. And a freeze-dried husband who [*Turning to him nastily.*] couldn't pull a greased stick out of a dog's arse.

[*PEGGY comes back through door on her way to arch and the kitchen. She's heard the last of it.*]

PEGGY: Sewer.

[*AILEEN makes a lunge at her and startles PEGGY into an undignified skip forward before she exits arch.*]

NICK: *[Gets up.]* Might just pump the bilge. Old nautical euphemism for visiting the euphemism. *[exits doorway.]*

JIM: There are five for dinner tonight.

AILEEN What's *that* supposed to mean?

JIM: Have you thought about food?

AILEEN: *[Going up to him menacingly.]* There's a freezer full of steaks. There's a store down the road with the rest. You got arms? You got legs? *[Kicks his chair.]* Stop cringing in your bloody chair. If you want something to happen, shift arse.

JIM: Do you want the girls to see you like this?

AILEEN: What's a git like you going to do about it?

*[Lights dim to rose spotlight emphasising JIM who stands and coldly draws revolver.]*

JIM: I think, Aileen, that even my great patience with you has its limit. You've destroyed my family and you've destroyed my life.

AILEEN: *[Quailing at sight of gun.]* No...

*[JIM shakes head, ponders and sits again. As he does the scene seems to reverse as AILEEN stops shrinking back and leans forward again to where she was. JIM tries it again, standing up and pulling gun once more. AILEEN reacts as scene plays forward.]*

JIM: I think, Aileen, that even my great patience with you has its limit. And I'm sure you'll be interested to know that I do this quite coldly and without malice... as I would lance a wound.

AILEEN: *[Now, in his fantasy, uncharacteristically terrified.]* No. No.

*[Gun goes off and she falls with much satisfying gurgling and flailing.]*

*[DETECTIVE [NICK], in trench-coat, enters doorway.]*

DETECTIVE: *[Scottish accent.]* Dr Hepworth, you're under arrest for the murder

of your wife.

JIM: [*Shakes head again.*] Mmm. That wouldn't be so good.

[*DETECTIVE exits walking backwards. AILEEN stands again, freezes in pre-daydream attitude, as JIM sits, putting gun away, ruminating over the scene.*]

We're still too craven to kill each other physically. So we do it psychically - with marriage.

[*The lights become normal. NICK enters from doorway as JIM subsides back into his chair.*]

AILEEN: Successful, love? Wash your hands?

JIM: [*To Nick.*] Ignore her.

AILEEN: Reminds me of that timeless poem: No matter how you jig and dance, the last few drops go down your pants.

JIM: You're revolting.

AILEEN: Oooo! The gelding whinnies. How's he think I got this way? Putting up with him, that's how. If he'd ever been a man, we could've made something of it. Got the words but he ain't got the music. [*To NICK.*] And will he get off his arse? No way. His joints are stiff because they never get used. [*Examines her now empty glass and exits arch to fill it.*]

JIM: So how are you surviving Sue?

NICK: Good question.

JIM: Thanks for that clarification. Yes, like most sentimental do-gooders she's intoxicated with her sense of importance. Soon as you believe the big lies - progress, justice, equality, democracy, fidelity, heaven, romantic love - you turn into a sanctimonious clown who drives practical people round the bend. Conventional thinkers are intolerant by definition. So be careful what you say to her. Speak sooth and you'll be stoned.

[*The lights go instantly to cold blue-white as both freeze in*

*whatever position they have reached. The GUIDE walks in from stage right and contemplates the scene.]*

NICK: [Unfreezing.] This is amazing. You're showing me everything. His daydreams. The lot.

GUIDE: And when he's not daydreaming, he's still dreaming. People aren't really there. They're trapped in their heads. They identify with anything. Their position in society, appearance, bank balance, what they think others think about them...

NICK: Anyway, you see what the family's like? I mean, no way you'd change them.

GUIDE: [Moves to the frozen JIM, stoops to stare into his eyes.] You can't change people because they can't hear. That is, you can't tell them their faults because they *are* their faults.

NICK: So what can you do?

GUIDE: I've already said you can't do.

NICK: There's something you're not telling me.

GUIDE: Because you wouldn't hear if I did. Real things are simple. But we're too complicated to see them.

*[NICK jerks back to his original frozen position as the lights instantly revert to scene setting. The GUIDE is gone. The two of them unfreeze and the scene continues.]*

JIM: Poor Sue suffers from the delusion that the way life treats her isn't her fault. She can't understand why it doesn't regard her as highly as she does.

*[They hear AILEEN returning and raise eyebrows at each other.]*

*[AILEEN enters again with full glass. She checks NICK'S drink which he's left alone.]*

AILEEN: [To NICK] How's your drink, lover? You've hardly touched it.

NICK: [Reluctantly picks it up again.] If this cup will not pass from me....

AILEEN: That's it, dearie. Drink me pretty.

*[The phone rings. AILEEN crosses to it.]*

Oooo!. The phoney-wone. Bless my whiskers. Who could this be? *[Picks up.]* Yawhol? *[Tone changes to sensible.]* G-day, love. ...He what? ...They can't do that. It's reserve. ...Well why didn't he show them the Court Order then? ...Didn't have it? Couldn't run a bath. ...Yes, got my copy. On my way. ....'Course I'm pissed. Don't worry. Drive faster when I'm shickered. ...I'll go in with John, then. He'll be right - can talk under wet cement. Oh, Christ. Christ. ....Just ring John and say I'm coming. ....I don't know. Can't think now. We're wasting time. *[Slams phone down. She opens sideboard drawer, upset, disoriented, drags out piece of paper, then looks around on table.]* Where're the bloody keys?

JIM: *[Stands.]* I've got them. You're not driving in that state. *[Moves downstage left.]*

AILEEN: The bloody Council's on the way to the reserve. They're going to chop down the trees along the fence.

JIM: Like you chop down your family. *[Fends her off with his stick.]*

AILEEN: Give me the keys you turd. *[She easily pulls it from him and throws it across the set. As she rushes him, he picks up the cane chair and fends her off with the legs like a lion tamer. She can't get past the chair.]*

AILEEN: Give me the... keys!

NICK: I'll drive you.

AILEEN: Oh, thanks, love. Thanks. We've got to go right now.

*[NICK, AILEEN exit arch.]*

*[JIM is shaken, breathing heavily, has put down chair but is leaning on back of it to support himself.]*

*[SUE enters from arch, concerned.]*

SUE: What's going on? *[Sees how he is, goes to him.]* You all right?

JIM: I'll survive.

SUE: Where's Nick?

- JIM: He's driven your mother to the reserve. Something to do with trees.
- SUE: You're sure you're all right, Dad?
- JIM: I'm fine. Where's Peg?
- SUE: We've been cleaning up the kitchen. Everything's rancid.
- JIM: I try not to go in there. The mould's bad for my chest.
- SUE: We've filled one garbage bag already. You sure you're okay?
- JIM: Fine. [*As he starts to struggle across stage to get his stick, she retrieves it and gives it to him.*]
- SUE: Here. [*Turns his usual chair around for him.*] Sit down.
- [JIM sits.]
- SUE: It's cold in here. [*Goes to shut French windows and says as she does it:*] Dad.
- JIM: Mm?
- SUE: I know it's none of my business. But wouldn't it be better if you and Mum... went your own ways? I mean. It's not as if we wouldn't understand. It could be better for Peggy even. I mean, do you really want to live like this? I'm sorry. I... shouldn't be talking behind Mum's back. It's just that... [*She comes back and kneels in front of him, buries her head in his lap, a little girl*] Oh, Dad...
- JIM: [*He strokes her hair.*] I was fond of her once. I really was. She came to interview me about an automatic valve I'd invented. So smart and pretty. We were young, with the whole world opening up ahead. She had the tongue, of course, but not aimed at me back then. We thought we'd be so happy. Didn't know much about anything, really. I wasn't what she was after. Wrong types, you see. But, in those days, you stuck it out.
- SUE: But you don't have to do that now.
- JIM: Too old now. Too late. Both contestants too wounded. Take them out of the arena, they'll still die.

SUE: Dad, it's simple. Just... leave her.

JIM: Cowards hate change.

SUE: Why not just... do it?

JIM: It'd make you happy?

SUE: [*Gets up.*] Not for me. For *you*.

JIM: I'll think about it.

SUE: How long? [*Despairing look.*]

PEGGY: [*Off, yelling.*] Say's she'll help and she walks away. No one does what they say they'll do.

SUE: [*Calling back.*] I'm coming! [*Gives him one last inquiring look and exits arch.*]

[*JIM gets up, shuffles toward door, unsettled, muttering.*]

JIM: Almost be worth it. Just to see her face.

#### SCENE FOUR:

*Most of set in darkness but the desk has now acquired a top-dressing that makes it a bed with old toy stuffed rabbit on pillow. Lighting shadow frame suggests a sloping attic bedroom window. It is SUE'S attic bedroom in the same house. SUE'S valise open on the bed and she is unpacking what she needs overnight. She is fighting morning sickness, pauses, picks up battered rag doll rabbit.*

SUE: Hello, Rajah. You're looking good for someone as old as you. Missed me? Should I take you home? No. I think this is your place. We had some great times, didn't we? And you're guarding my old bed. [*Puts toy down again with care.*] Rajah, dear. [*She pats its head.*] Do you think he'll marry me?

[PEGGY enters stage right, hair wet and wearing a towelling bathrobe, shower-bag in hand.]

PEGGY: Little girl. Playing with her dolls.

SUE: [Turns around to see her.] Hi, kiddo. Dear old Rajah. We were just catching up. Had a shower?

PEGGY: Obviously. Obviously. Since everyone says I stink.

SUE: [Trying, as always with Peggy to keep it light, on track.] You're a funny one. Remember this old room? Your bed was over there, then.

[PEGGY gives sulky shrug.]

And you'd never let me pull the blind up. You were a funny little kid. How's my baby sister, eh? Gee it's good to see you. [Hugs her.]

[PEGGY pulls a face, jerks away. SUE tries another tack.]

Well, we got the kitchen straightened out, didn't we? Mum'll get a shock.

PEGGY: Sewer. Filthy dirty mouth.

SUE: [Shakes head.] Always has to be the centre of attention. She should have been a comedian. She did a turn at a fundraising dinner once. The men enjoyed it but the women didn't know where to look.

PEGGY: Sewer.

SUE: Still it's great to see Dad.

PEGGY: Stupid old fool.

SUE: [Time to change the subject.] So tell me about the job.

PEGGY: I work for Maggot's PA, now.

SUE: Who's this Maggot woman? [Sickness getting to her.]

PEGGY: The wife of the man who owns the business. Got millions, dirty rotten things. I think they set up the Foundation so they feel better about it all. She looks good. Glamour-puss. Hypocrite. Doing disgusting filthy things with other men.

*[SUE gags, hurriedly exits stage right and we hear her throw up, then tap running. PEGGY calls after her:]*

What's wrong with you?

AILEEN: *[Yelling off.]* Are you bitches still up there?

PEGGY: *[Back with her obsession, runs stage left and yells back as if down stairs.]* Sewer. Not a mother. You're a sewer.

*[Lights go to rose. PEGGY straightens with a jerk, holds imaginary phone to her ear, speaks in her version of an imperious tone...]*

PEGGY: What? Speak up, Grudge. Very well. I'll meet you at the cells.

*[She puts down phone and walks in slow circles as if descending a circular staircase. As she goes round, we see someone now walking ahead of her - a stooped old man in soiled white coat who carries a lantern and drags one leg. He wears a tousled wig and has cotton wool pads in his cheeks to make him grotesque. This is GRUDGE [JIM]. The light is dimming. PEGGY is behind him now and he looks round. They stop. Now we see AILEEN on the floor. She is in a straight-jacket and unconscious.]*

GRUDGE: Seizure Friday last. An' now she's ravin' bonkers. Ave to force feed 'er. Just wonderin' if you think it's worth the effort.

PEGGY: Yes. Keep her alive.

GRUDGE: But my way, she'll kick off in three weeks. And yer know we're short-staffed.

PEGGY: It's too kind to let her starve.

GRUDGE: I don't fathom yer meaning, doctor.

PEGGY: I want... to watch... her rot!

*[Lights to normal. AILEEN AND GRUDGE exit walking backward. SUE enters stage right wiping her mouth with a tissue.]*

PEGGY: [Knowing smile.] You pregnant?

SUE: Don't be silly.

PEGGY: I'll find out. I always do. [Sly.] So is he going to marry you?

SUE: I don't want to talk about that now.

PEGGY: Means no. Means he just wants you for lewd disgusting acts. Stupid. Stupid. So he's asked you to marry him or not?

SUE: My private life is *private*.

PEGGY: Not in this house, it's not. I'll find out. I always do.

AILEEN: [Shrieking off.] Will you lot come down here. Like herding cats.

PEGGY: [Runs to left side of stage and calls down again.] Sewer!

SUE: You better get dressed. Looks like we're cooking tonight.

PEGGY: [Spiteful.] She'll get hers. Disgusting sewer. Every doggie has his day. One day she'll be taught a lesson. Something she'll take to her grave.

SUE: [Serious.] Peg, if you do anything, you'll be assessed again and you know where you'll end up then. Did you take your pill today?

PEGGY: Don't you lecture me. Doing disgusting dirty things with men. Filthy things with your naked bodies.

SUE: God, you can be spiteful.

PEGGY: [Goading.] Sweet Sue. Sweet Sue. Not sweet *now*.

SUE: [Reacting.] Vicious nasty thing.

PEGGY: Doing things with your filthy private parts. Hope you get a filthy disease.

SUE: You're *SICK!*

[SUE storms out stage left. PEGGY looks around and finds a pair of scissors, crosses to the bed and, starts to stab the rabbit, singing tunelessly as she does so.]

PEGGY:               Rajah. Rajah.  
                           She - loves - you.  
                           Aren't you sor-ry  
                           She's not here.  
                           Rip you up and  
                           Let you die.

**SCENE FIVE:**

*The Hepworth's living-room that evening. Dinner is over. No one is in the room. Voices off, talking together and the rattle of plates being scraped or put in sink. The family is now mellow.*

SUE:                   [OFF] You've had enough, Mum.

AILEEN:             [OFF] It's my liver, not yours.

*[A crash. A pile of cutlery has fallen on the floor.]*

PEGGY:               [OFF] Butter-fingers! Butter-fingers!

NICK:                 [OFF] Sorry. My hands were wet and they slipped.

PEGGY:               [OFF] Butter-fingers! Pick them up.

SUE:                   [OFF] Can you bring the other coffees, Dad?

*[SUE enters arch with coffees, followed by JIM and PEGGY with more. They put the spares down on the table, busy themselves with milk and sugar.]*

JIM:                   So we got through dinner without bloodshed. An achievement.

PEGGY:               With no help from you. Ostrich. Ostrich. Head in the sand.

JIM: Come on, Peg. Enough of that.

PEGGY: Ostrich.

*[They sit, JIM and SUE on the couch, PEGGY by herself on wicker chair, downstage left.]*

AILEEN: *[OFF]* Leave 'em on the floor, love. It'll all look the same in two days.

PEGGY: *[Calling back at arch.]* Sewer.

JIM: Peg, it's dangerous to externalise emotions.

PEGGY: How would you know? You don't have them.

AILEEN: *[OFF]* Can't find anything now they've cleaned up.

JIM: *[To SUE.]* You didn't eat much tonight.

PEGGY: Ask her why.

SUE: Kiddo! Can't we just be happy here. For once? That's all I want.

JIM: Contradiction in terms. You can't want things and be happy. Buddha explained that.

SUE: *[Snaps at him.]* Do you have to add footnotes to everything people say? It's... sententious.

*[AILEEN enters with port on tray and glasses. She dumps it on the table and takes her own larger glass.]*

AILEEN: What a big word! We are impressed. *[She half squats in office chair, legs apart. Coffee is not her drink.]* Self-serve.

*[NICK enters with his coffee, props himself against the table.]*

PEGGY: Look at the filthy disgusting way she sits.

NICK: *[Lifts tray, takes the port around, offers one to PEGGY.]* Like a port?

PEGGY: And you're just as bad. Filthy dirty things you do.

*[NICK starts to move away.]*

Just a minute. [*Grabs glass.*]

[*NICK offers to SUE and JIM. He takes one.*]

SUE: I'll stick with coffee, thanks.

NICK: How her honeyed words delight me.

SUE: With milk.

NICK: Milk - from contented cartons. [*Brings it to her.*]

AILEEN: [*Raises glass.*] There are none like us. And none like us. Campai!

[*The others grudgingly raise their glasses for the toast and AILEEN swigs down the last of her drink.*]

[*SUE looking abstracted. As she enters into her daydream the lights dim to rose spotlight, highlighting her.*]

NICK: Well, everyone, I have a small matter to clear up here. [*Drops to knees in front of SUE and produces ring box.*] Darling, I know we have nothing in common and that I'm a deeply shallow person. But I dearly wish to accompany you through the Valley of the Shadow of Life. For when you smile, cactus wilts and photographers stop down. Dear dominant chord in my major scale, I wish you to be my bride. But, as we are still without benefit of clergy, [*Offers ring.*] dearest, will you marry me?

SUE: Yes. [*Kisses him and tries on ring.*] Oh, Nick, it's lovely.

JIM: This is wonderful news.

AILEEN: Well what can one say?

SUE: Try to be nice, for once.

AILEEN: I'm very glad, dear. Really. Glad for you both.

PEGGY: [*Envious.*] Ask her what brought this on.

AILEEN: You're pregnant?

[*SUE nods, smiling.*]

- JIM: [Delighted.] A grandchild. That's marvellous.  
[Lights to normal. All in former place and attitude.]
- JIM: [Shifts painfully.] I know ageing is the only way to live a long time but, Lord, it can be painful.
- AILEEN: [Determined to dominate the room.] Which proves God is a shit. As for his son. Hopeless organiser. Only a drip would have a birthday that close to Christmas.
- SUE: Mum. We've got this far. Please, *please* don't wreck it now.
- AILEEN: Ooo! Ooo! Have I said something wrong, dear. Have I, offended your beliefs? Oooo! Hush my mouth. [Smacks her own hand.]
- SUE: Mum. Please. Please. Can't we just this once be decent to each other? Just once in a lifetime? Please?
- AILEEN: [Gives SUE the *two fingered gesture*.] One up the fundament and one up the fun bung. Though, in your case, they're probably interchangeable.
- SUE: You're... You're....  
[NICK offers AILEEN a port.]
- AILEEN: [Takes it.] Thanks, lover. [To NICK.] Did you know... did you knooooow... that little Susie talks to Jesus?
- SUE: I did my novitiate. She's never let me forget it.
- AILEEN: And the trail to her cloud of glory's still warm!
- JIM: [Gets up painfully. He can't sit anywhere for long.] Miss BA Honours 1950.
- SUE: [To AILEEN, despairing of her.] All you can do is destroy things.
- PEGGY: Thinks she talks to God. And he *hears* her. Delusions. She's unhinged.
- AILEEN: [To SUE] Ooooo. OOooo. A lunatic thinks your mad.

PEGGY: [To AILEEN] There's nothing wrong with my mind, I'll have you know.

AILEEN: Course not, pet. Never been used. [*Leans toward her belligerently.*] Most people live and learn but you just live.

[SUE starting to fume as the last chance of a reasonable evening deteriorates. JIM has moved downstage right and stands with his back to them, leaning on his stick.]

PEGGY: [To Aileen.] Disgusting filthy tart. You'll... burn... in ... *hell*.

AILEEN: What a quaint superstition. What do you think *this* is?

PEGGY: Sewer. Sewer.

AILEEN [*Gets up, stalks over to PEGGY.*] Who bore you? Who fed you? Who cleaned up your mess? Who took you to the dentist and listened to you rave? Made excuses for you, dressed you, bought you presents, wiped your nose? Took you to parties, holidays, carted you to school. Put up with you for twenty years while you drove her round the twist till she loathed the very sight of you? Who?

PEGGY: More fool you. Flabby old tart.

AILEEN: Up, your giggly with a blowtorch. [*Pours herself another drink at the table.*] But then nothing's been up there, has there, except the occasional startled carrot? Chastity's its own punishment and you're the living proof.

PEGGY: [*Half out of chair, but too scared of her mother to do anything physical. They always threaten each other but nothing ever happens.*] Disgusting. I'll hit you. I'll hit you.

AILEEN: Be the last thing you do.

SUE: Stop it. Stop it. *STOP!*

NICK: [*Fixing drink himself.*] So here we are - welded by affection into the torpedo of fellow-feeling, churning through seas of concord to an explosion of...

PEGGY: Cow dung and chook feathers!

NICK: Bravo!

SUE: [Exasperated with him for potentiating the misery.] Do you have to make it worse?

JIM: What this family needs is a forensic psychiatrist.

AILEEN: [Bumps her hip into NICK on her way back to the chair.] So how's the ad-game, lover? What crap are you flogging now?

NICK: Imported Champagne. Full page colour spreads. Three headings. [Makes squares in the air for each ad.] You ready? 'Not for people who think the Ring Cycle has pedals.' 'Not for people who think recessive genes are a fashion statement.' 'Not for people who think the Bronte Sisters live south of Bondi.'

AILEEN: Reckon anyone'll get it?

NICK: Who cares? Long as they buy it. Empty brand image scores every time.

JIM: [Turns.] Why did you go into advertising?

NICK: Couldn't do anything else.

SUE: [To PEGGY, sotto.] Filthy thing. Don't pick your nose.

PEGGY: Don't tell me what to do. Think you're so holy. Holy? You're disgusting. Exposing your filthy private parts to men.

AILEEN: [Leans to side, farts loudly.] Ah. Better out than in.

SUE: Mum? Was that you? MUM!

JIM: She's hardly your after-dinner fantasy.

AILEEN: Ooooo. Did my darling husband wax his lyricals? How significant.

PEGGY: [To NICK.] So now you've inseminated her with your filthy prong, are you going to make an honest woman of her?

NICK: [Looks at SUE inquiringly, thinking she's told PEGGY. SUE slightly shakes her head to deny it. NICK, on the spot, reverts to a quip to save himself.] No love so hot but marriage cools it.

SUE: [Reacts angrily.] I beg your pardon?

NICK: Old Russian proverb.

AILEEN: [To PEGGY.] What are you raving about? [To SUE.] You *pregnant?*

SUE: [Hesitates long moments. The room hangs on her response.] Yes.

[AILEEN and JIM react. NICK very uncomfortable.]

PEGGY: [Jeering laugh.] I found out. I always do.

[The lights go instantly to a cold blue-white as all freeze in whatever position they have reached.]

NICK: [Unfreezing, looking stage right.] Hello? You there? [His manner under the blue light is quite different - far more serious and respectful than he is in the scenes themselves.]

GUIDE: [The GUIDE walks in from stage right.] I'm here.

NICK: Christ! This is a brutal.

GUIDE: A puppet show. Each puppet pulls the other's strings.

[NICK spreads hands.]

[GUIDE walks around and between the frozen ones in turn.] The father believes in not taking life but wants to take his own. The daughter likes to keep things nice but always gets angry with people. The mother wants personal freedom but does everything to bind herself more.

NICK: And I'm no better. Why?

GUIDE: Because your inside's on the outside when it should be the other way around.

NICK: There has to be something you can show me that can help.

GUIDE: Many things. For instance, you vanish into your talking. So try not to say so much. If you could manage to do that, your words would have more weight and people would respect you more.

NICK: [Despairing of himself.] Jesus! Is there anything good about me at all?

GUIDE: The usual safety mechanism.

NICK: What's that?

GUIDE There's nothing permanent in you.

NICK: And that's good?

GUIDE: It means you still have a chance. Only lunatics and psychopaths have a permanent ego. [*He's back to PEGGY.*] This poor one, for instance. Completely fixed. [*Lifts PEGGY's arm higher. It jerks back to the position it was in when he stops touching it.*] Her life stopped the moment she was born.

NICK: That's... *horrible!*

GUIDE: Yes. It's not easy to see real things.

NICK: So! I'm going to have to... live through this situation?

GUIDE: Apparently. Let's move on.

*[NICK jerks back to his original frozen position as the lights instantly revert to scene setting. The GUIDE is gone. The others unfreeze and carry on.]*

AILEEN: [*To NICK.*] So you're fertilized the freak. What now?

NICK: We're thinking about that. [*He realises he's becoming the outsider and starts to defend himself.*] She's only just *told* me.

AILEEN: Well! [*Glances at the sulking SUE, then around the room.*] What a scene of jubilation. Could count the smiling faces on the fingers of a careless butcher.

PEGGY: [*Jeering at NICK.*] Teach you to stick your filthy thing up her. Disgusting. Dirty....

AILEEN: [*Turning on her.*] Know part of your problem, pet? You're a sexual psychopath. And trying to do anything about is like trying to turn shit into clay.

PEGGY: Sewer. Look at your filthy stinking house. Look at the way you live. In this stinking filthy mess. That shows what your mind's like. Sewer.

- AILEEN: If you don't like it here, piss off.
- PEGGY: [*Hoity.*] I stayed for just one reason. It was too late to catch the train.
- AILEEN: You missed that years ago.
- [PEGGY *makes cross with fingers in front of her and hisses.*]
- SUE: Why are you all so... *hurtful*?
- JIM: Well, let's leave that alone for now. And perhaps, Nick, we'll have a chat about it later? Sue, you said you had some shots of your holiday. Why don't you er...
- SUE: [*Glad for the diversion.*] They're upstairs. Should I get them?
- JIM: Might help.
- SUE: This... *family!* [*Exits arch.*]
- AILEEN: And it's just grown by one now she's decided to salute the planet with a screaming brat. [*Jaded look at NICK.*] Or should I make that two? Never heard you so quiet.
- PEGGY: He's not going to marry her. Just wants what's between her legs.
- AILEEN: [*Not impressed with him.*] Pinning *you* down's like nailing jelly to a tree.
- JIM: Leave him alone. And for God's sake, have some coffee.
- AILEEN: Ooooo. Is my wetter half suggesting I'm not in control of my faculties?
- JIM: You can't find your mouth with the glass.
- AILEEN: Ooooo. A brain-cell stormed. We're so impressed - you pompous git. [*To NICK*] He's got as much independence as a pull-along toy. But he wants you to believe he's superior because he once invented a machine that keeps zombies breathing and he's spent the rest of his time piling a load of old books into a barricade to stop him feeling anything at all. What a humungus achievement. I'm impressed. And if *I'm* impressed, the rest of you must be over the moon with abject... uncritical... admiration.

*[They turn as furious SUE enters from arch with ruined rag doll. It now has the stuffing hanging out. She storms up to PEGGY, glares down at her, shakes the doll in her face.]*

SUE: What's this?

*[PEGGY looks away. AILEEN snorts.]*

SUE: Who did this? Peggy? You?

PEGGY: Playing with dolls at your age.

SUE: *[Confronts her.]* You did this?

PEGGY: Sweet Sue who got herself knocked up. Not so sweet now. *[She slides out of the chair, turns to fight if needed, claws her hands ready to scratch.]* Don't you touch me. Don't you....

AILEEN: *[Up and confronting PEGGY.]* You. Sit down. Or I'll have you back in the bin so fast your feet won't touch the floor.

*[PEGGY holds out crossed fingers in front of her and hisses again at AILEEN, but sits. She knows AILEEN means it. AILEEN wheels round again to PEGGY]*

One more word...

*[SUE, in despair, slumps in chair.]*

JIM: *[Moves gratefully back to his now vacated favourite chair.]* They say time heals all things but I think tonight might leave a scar.

SUE: *[Sobbing.]* I so much... wanted this to be right. Just this once. Even if we'd all pretended... it would have been... something.

AILEEN: Ooooo. Ooooo. She's leaking from the eyes. What commendable sensitivity. Yes, this is your family. Suck it up.

SUE: You're right. We *are* in hell.

*[NICK lifts tray off table. starts to take it back to kitchen.]*

SUE: *[Looks at NICK.]* You act like a flip.

*[NICK exits arch with tray.]*

[To JIM] You back away. [To AILEEN] You tear people apart. [And to PEGGY] And you...

AILEEN: Shut up. I can't hear myself drink. [Goes to fill her glass.] Reckon I need a stiff one. [Pointedly to JIM.] `Bout the only stiff one I'll get.

JIM: I'm going to bed.

AILEEN: You're just as useless there.

JIM: That's enough.

AILEEN: Ooooo. Thus spake Jimbo - the armchair sage. When the going gets tough, he gets up and goes.

JIM: She's pissed as a fart. [He gets up and begins to back out of room toward arch, keeping an eye on her. To others:] Goodnight.

SUE: [To JIM.] Why do you always run away?

[JIM'S slight reaction.]

AILEEN: That went in.

JIM: I'm tired.

SUE: You never make a stand.

AILEEN: Hasn't for years. Take that any way you like. [Dry laugh.] He blows hard about Kierkegaard, makes low digs at Heidegger but ask him to put the garbage out and he's suddenly cataleptic. As for sinking the salami, he can't even piss against the wind.

[JIM is attempting not to react but is stung. PEGGY sullenly leaves her chair and exits by French windows.]

[Lights to rose with overhead spotlight on JIM as he sits and plays out another daydream. The others retreat backward out of view as saffron-robed NICK enters light, makes obeisance, kneels at JIM'S feet.]

NANDA: [NICK] Oh Lord Tathagata, I beseech you to continue your instruction.

- SAGE: [JIM *has assumed Buddha-like persona.*] What troubles you now, oh Nanda?
- NANDA: I perceive I am still chained by the karma of my family. At times, my thoughts dwell upon them, binding me to care and agitation.
- SAGE: Surely it is unworthy to be unsettled by thoughts of your relatives?
- NANDA: Yet I feel so bound to them, oh Lord.
- SAGE: [*Reeling it off sanctimoniously.*] Does not delusion tie one person to another? In the vast cycle of lives, people are no more than birds that flock together in the dusk. And relatives are like travellers who, for a while, meet at an inn.
- NANDA: But the suffering they bring still afflicts me.
- SAGE: Wherever this body goes, suffering must follow. Our hold on life is tenuous and there is no rock of reliance. The soil of our birth merely grows calamities. Contention, affliction, death are inescapable.
- NANDA: What then is possible for me?
- SAGE: Seclusion from the world, contentment with little, patience always. Remain... aloof.
- NANDA: Yet I stumble at the threshold of peace.
- SAGE: Shun then, oh Nanda, familiarity with others. Live by them but not of them. Why mingle with the agents of defilement?
- NANDA: Again, you direct me to inward solitude... the need to sip the nectar of the deathless.
- SAGE: [*Somewhat surprised.*] I do?
- NANDA: The Lord must surely speak from this emptiness.
- SAGE: [*In the uncomfortable position of having a pupil who has outstripped him.*] He must?
- NANDA: [*Laughs politely.*] The Tathagata teaches through his humour. But the meaning shines. All those near to you have sensed the non-duality you speak of... where the abiding is between heaven and earth, between the void and manifestation.

SAGE: They have?

NANDA: I know words distort before they even pass the lips. What expression can there be for the ineffable?

SAGE: Search me.

NANDA: And profoundly have you explained how we must dance with life while remaining free.

SAGE: I don't remember that bit.

NANDA: Or surely detachment could be confused with a mere retreat into intellectualism - a dull indifference - a reticence born of fear - dry, defensive, dead. The antithesis of the vitality you have shown us?

SAGE: [*Disgruntled.*] Give it a rest. Rack off.

NANDA: [*Retreating humbly, bowing until he backs out arch.*] Yet I am with you. For nothing is separate.

SAGE: Indian smartarse!

*[Lights to normal and situation back to former tableau.]*

AILEEN: ...And right now, he's up shit creek without a paddle in a barbed wire canoe and it's raining fat, hot turds. And what can he do about it? Bugger all.

SUE: [*Crossing the room to be with and protect her father.*] My father's done a lot for the world. He's proved his worth. And as far as I'm concerned he's a gentle, patient person who's put up with hell - God knows why - never said an unkind word and he... and he... has my respect. And my love.

AILEEN: OOoo! How impressed we are with your inner beauty - you sappy git!

SUE: I can't believe I'm listening to my mother.

*[JIM is trying to sidle off.]*

Dad. Stay here. Please.

JIM: What's the point?

SUE: I need you to be strong. Dad?

*[He frowns. She leads him back by the arm. He slowly sits.]*

AILEEN: *[GRINS]* Now you've got him on toast. Observe! A snail without a shell. He finds facing things more uncomfortable than a split bamboo suppository.

*[NICK enters from arch, in his usual form.]*

SUE: Dad?

JIM: *[On the spot.]* What do you expect me to do?

SUE: Stand up for yourself for once. Do something about... this situation.

AILEEN: Like expecting a steaming cow-pat to turn into bone china. He can't do anything. Hasn't done anything for years? Not even 'home to bed and into Mum'. Even his coughs are unproductive. Dry coughs and wet farts. Buy him white underpants and they end up burnt sienna.

JIM: This is ridiculous. *[Tries a diversion.]* Where's Peggy?

AILEEN: With a bit of luck, hanging herself.

JIM: I better go and check on her. *[A ploy to get off the hook and away.]*

AILEEN: God, no. Don't interrupt her.

SUE: *[Despairing.]* Dad?

*[JIM pauses, caught.]*

AILEEN: *[Wickedly sweet.]* I'll give you a hand, dear. *[To JIM]* For the past ten years I suppose you think I've been sitting around. My first go was the lad next door. Took me six months to work him up to it.

JIM: *[To SUE]* She's making it up.

AILEEN: Second was your mate Neville. He may be a prune but he functions - with manual stimulation. No spunk-bubble. But a bloody sight better than Mogadons. Remember the weekend I went to town for the old girls' reunion? Well the only old girl around was me. Can

still show you the rug-burns.

SUE: Are you going to take this? Dad?

JIM: This is... true?

AILEEN: Haven't told the half of it. Five more to come. And all of them did.

SUE: God! [*She exits in despair via French window.*]

JIM: [*Breathing heavily.*] Aileen. It's enough. It's high time we...

AILEEN: Yes, dear?

JIM: ...went our separate ways.

AILEEN: Ooo. Ooo. Such a cryptic statement. What, I ask myself, does it portend?

JIM: I'm too... old for any more of this.

AILEEN: So what's on your mind? Or have you learned to talk without moving your brain?

[*She waits. He cannot bring himself to go further, looks ill.*]

Get a life. Deal with it. What?

[*JIM staggers slightly, holding on to table.*]

JIM: I want a divorce.

[*He nods.*]

AILEEN: Don't make me laugh. Piss-weak lemming. Divorce me? [*laughs*] I'll take you for all you've got in one easy litigation. [*To NICK, wanting his complicity.*] He won't divorce me in a fit. Because he's tight as a fish's arse. [*To JIM*] Do it. Do it. I can use the dough. Doesn't anyone get bloody drinks around here? [*She is unsettled and this last sentence shows how shocked she is. She exits arch.*]

[*JIM subsides into his chair.*]

NICK: [*Moves over to him.*] You all right?

JIM: My arm feels weak.

*[Bang of screen door off. Sound of a scuffle and a scream from AILEEN. NICK looks around as PEGGY races through French window, with a shovel, and stands, back to the wall.]*

*[AILEEN is now seen framed in the open window. Both of them are panting. AILEEN is stiff with rage and has a cut on her cheek.]*

AILEEN: You did this to yourself. You're going straight back. *[She strides to the phone, checks the address book near it, dials. NICK stands warily by. SUE comes back through the French window.]*

NICK: *[To SUE]* What happened?

SUE: She's ringbarked Mum's favourite tree.

AILEEN: Yes, admissions please.

*[PEGGY scuttles across the room and swings shovel at AILEEN. NICK, tackles her and AILEEN ducks but the shovel crashes down on her hand which is resting on the phone. NICK forces screaming PEGGY to the floor and holds her as SUE takes the shovel away from her. AILEEN'S hand is broken. She has dropped the phone to hug it, slumps onto couch, gasping in pain. The phone dangles. SUE rushes to her, concerned.]*

SUE: Mum. Are you OK?

AILEEN: She's broken my hand.

SUE: Let me see.

AILEEN: Don't touch it. Just let me sit. *[She's in mild shock.]*

*[NICK cautiously lets PEGGY loose.]*

SUE: We'll have to get you to the hospital for an X-ray. Won't we, Dad?

AILEEN: *[Cold and practical now.]* You've got to sort her out first.

*[JIM hasn't answered, is frowning, concerned with himself. NICK helps him to his chair. PEGGY rocks.]*

SUE: *[Gets to phone.]* They've hung up.

AILEEN: It's under Psychiatric Centre.

[SUE busies herself looking for it, dials etc.]

PEGGY: [*Whimpering, rocking.*] You don't care.

AILEEN: [*To PEGGY in quite an altered voice.*] You could have been such a pretty girl. We've never got on, have we? You were such a disappointment. I know I should care. I know you want me to but... some people don't get on. They just can't... feel for each other. It's not because they don't want to. It... hurts them but they can't. It's not because you're... not normal. I'm sorry, love.

[*Her words are unbearable to PEGGY who howls and bangs her head on the floor as NICK tries to stop her.*]

JIM: [*Pathetic voice.*] I can't... move my arm.

## END ACT ONE

## ACT TWO

### SCENE ONE:

*Back to setting of Scene One Act One - the REALITY INSTITUTE - the scene staged in overhead spotlight in front of the darkened main set. Same stark desk, two chairs weathercock and signal box lever. Same overhead spotlight for dramatic effect. NICK in chair with GUIDE behind him, hands each side of his head as we saw them at the end of the first scene. The GUIDE nods and moves away from him.*

- NICK: How can you show me all this by just touching me?
- GUIDE: What you are... is what happens to you.
- NICK: If this happens, it's a train wreck. Pregnant. Christ!
- GUIDE: But there are things you could do to avoid it. Or *not* do. Not doing's the hardest thing.
- NICK: I should never have got involved with that bitch.
- GUIDE: Perhaps. But, from a wider perspective what happens doesn't matter. What happens is effect. And an effect can't change an effect. You need to go to the cause. I don't know if you see that.
- [NICK *shakes head.*]
- GUIDE: [*Moves to signal lever and stoops.*] It's as if you're trying to move this lever from down here, [*his hands are grasping it right down at the base. He tries to move it but can't, smiles.*] instead of up here. [*He straightens and moves the lever from the handle in the normal way.*] The cause... is in you! So, by analogy, you're here. [*He touches the handle.*] And the result or effect is down here. [*Touches lever's base.*] So *you* have to change. But everyone tries to change the effect. [*Touches base.*] They never go to the cause. [*Touches handle.*] For that, you need to stand apart inside. [*Points to his chest.*] In other words, to turn reaction into response. It's hard to understand, I know.
- NICK: But you said people can't change.
- GUIDE: Not as they are. But once they see something about themselves, possibilities begin. [*Moves back to desk.*]
- NICK: So how do you... stand apart?
- GUIDE: Stay inside this here. [*Touches his belly with his hand.*] To be aware of your body is a start.
- NICK: But if you went around like that, people would think you were zombie.
- GUIDE: Yes. Because they want the stimulus of your reaction. They even call it nice names - like spontaneity. So you need to be intelligent. In other words, act as you always do. Act... your part outwardly. But without losing your inner sense of self.

NICK: Act?

GUIDE: It's the only safe way. [*Sits behind desk.*] You know, in the Middle Ages, actors were despised. Because, as people saw it then, they were giving up their individuality to play someone else. But now such niceties of discrimination don't bother us. Now actors are worshipped. Because people no longer distinguish between personality and individuality. But there are still a few real actors - even on the stage. [*Stands again and walks slowly around.*] Do you know what real acting is?

NICK: No.

GUIDE: To play yourself.

NICK: Myself?

GUIDE: [*Stands again.*] Real acting's a high calling, even if it's not your profession. It means to play your part in life - in this bazaar we call the world - without being pulled out of yourself by what's happening on the outside. Wherever you go, however you move, whatever happens, the trick is never to lose the inner sense of self.

NICK: Simple to say.

GUIDE: And extremely difficult in practice. It takes years before you can maintain the sense of yourself behind everything. Like an anchor. Are you tired?

NICK: Confused.

[GUIDE *nods*. He's paused beside weather-cock, moves it in different directions.]

GUIDE: You see this? This part turns in every direction with each wind. Because it needs to respond to what comes. But this part - the spindle it turns on - [*indicates the central spindle.*] is always central - never disturbed.

[NICK *nods slowly.*]

[GUIDE *gives him a kind smile.*] I know. It's hard to hear real things. [*Moves back behind NICK.*] So what happens next? Shall we see? [*Places hands back on NICKS head.*]

**SCENE TWO:**

*The Hepworth's living-room, a winter morning several weeks later. The room is a bit tidier. A doorbell rings.]*

AILEEN:            *[Off]* All right. All right. *[Enters from door stage left, dumps drink on table and crosses to exit right through arch. She is in the usual alcoholic haze and has plaster-cast on her arm.]* Well! Look who's dropped in from the blue empyrean.

NICK:                *[Off]* How you make the English language sing.

*[They come back into room.]*

AILEEN:            Thought it was the Custodian of the Living Dead.

NICK:                They're not back from the clinic yet?

AILEEN:            Nup. *[Retrieves drink from table.]*

NICK:                I see you're still sicklied oer with the pale cast of plaster.

AILEEN:            Means I can't do a bloody thing. Which is convenient when your motto's "procrastinate now". What are you here for anyway?

NICK:                I think it's some kind of three-power conference.

*[PEGGY enters from door. She wears a nightdress and a baggy cardigan and carries an empty cookie jar.]*

PEGGY:             What's all the noise?

NICK:                Hi, Peggy. You're looking well.

PEGGY:             Liar.

AILEEN             What d'you think your doing?

PEGGY:             I get hungry watching television. They're always advertising food. *[Exits arch.]*

NICK: She seems better.

AILEEN: Doped to the eyeballs. If ignorance is bliss, she's ecstatic.

NICK: Didn't she go to the home?

AILEEN: They only keep 'em three weeks. Then back to the family or you lose the invalid pension. And you wonder why I drink?

NICK: [*Sits.*] So how the hell are you?

AILEEN: Still hanging on to misery in a dark house full of dirt. [*Points to sideboard where there are drinks on a tray.*] If you want a snort, you'll have to fix it yourself.

NICK: Today, I could use it. [*Goes over to do it.*]

*[PEGGY stomps back into room from arch with full jar and crosses, saying to NICK:]*

PEGGY: So are you going to marry her? Or is she going to have the kid on her own?

AILEEN: Get out of here, you troll. [*Lunges at her.*]

PEGGY: [*Skips to the side (her mother can still physically intimidate her) and says to NICK.*] I know what you do. And I've found something out about you. And I'm going to tell Sue. Feeling nervous?

*[AILEEN lunges at her again and as PEGGY exits door NICK suspects what it is, looks grim.]*

AILEEN: [*Sits in cane chair.*] She's got the brain of a dead wombat. [*Toasting*] To the greater glory of grog. [*Gulps.*] As for Her Holiness - Daddy's little angel. So pure you'd think she was married to the trinity - that's trigamy, by the way. This morning... she told me... to drink in moderation!

NICK: Nothing as extreme as moderation.

AILEEN: [*Takes another huge gulp*] She gives me the Tom-Tits. I know I'm sobriety deprived. But it's better to waste your life than do nothing with it.

NICK: [*He halfsits on desk and picks up brochure from it.*] Conservation

Congress?

AILEEN: Launceston. Plus five days in Cradle Mountain National Park. Ask yourself who I went with.

NICK: Ah. Hidden agenda?

AILEEN: Male gender. Been two years, now, and we're sick of the 'hidden' bit.

NICK: [*Moves to look at books in bookshelf.*] They say the keenest thrills are adultery and insider trading.

AILEEN: Dunno about insider trading but I've done a lot of power undressing.

NICK: What's he like?

AILEEN: A pinko-radical, disaffected, dole-bludging, bleeding-heart, Trotskyite. But I can cope with political juveniles. He's also hung like a fire hose and got a voice so deep you can smell shit on his breath. Bit of a botanist, too. Knows the generic name of every plant. And generally easy going. Placid - but not flaccid.

NICK: I knew you'd insist on a rigid standard.

AILEEN: Ugly, though. Egg-shell blond.

NICK: Bald men are aerodynamic.

AILEEN: We don't do it in a wind-tunnel. 'Course he's married but I'll fix that. And he's got a weekender in Tathra. So if you reckon I'm going to hang around here, you're suitable case for treatment.

NICK: So you're just going to leave Jim to it?

AILEEN: Let the dead bury the dead. Shame the ambulance didn't back over him.

NICK: Would have been a medical reverse.

AILEEN: What are you looking for?

NICK: Got it. *All that Breathes* - a review of *The Sanctity of Life* by noted anaesthetist James Hepworth. Impressive. [*Turns pages.*]

AILEEN: *[Laughs.]* Ah, yes. His famous book. Very well received. Three of his doctor friends bought a copy. Increased sales thirty per cent.

NICK: *[Smiles.]* I'll miss you.

AILEEN: You like the old lush, do you?

NICK: I think she's gutsy and great fun.

AILEEN: Shit. I'm charmed in my simple way.

*[OFF: Sound of door being unlocked. SUE talking to JIM. NICK puts book down on desk and goes to help, exits arch. AILEEN stands up and drops book in waste paper basket. The others come back through arch, NICK wheeling JIM and SUE carrying his things. JIM looks thinner, shrunken, is paralysed down one side.]*

AILEEN: Here he is. Hell on wheels. Looks fit, for a dying man.

SUE: Mum. I need to talk to you about his medicine and...

JIM: I can do that.

SUE: I'll just put these things in your room. Mum, could you warm up some of that soup? ...Mum?

AILEEN: *[Curtseys.]* Immediately, your highness. Stupid bitch!

*[SUE huffs, exits door and AILEEN exits arch.]*

NICK: So what's the damage?

JIM: This and this *[Pointing to immobile left arm and leg.]* don't work. I also have wind in the transverse colon and psychologically-induced depression if you want the medical term for it. And, according to the brain-scan, prognosis is bad. But then, none of us get out of here alive.

NICK: You mean it'll get worse?

JIM: Most fatal things do. It's no fun being a doctor. You know what you're in for. In my case, more strokes. As for my alimentary canal. I'll soon shit myself and slag. Talk about quality of life. Don't get old. It'll kill you.

- NICK: Sue says she wants to look after you.
- JIM: Poor love's stinking of sanctity. Ready to sacrifice everything but the self-adulation of martyrdom. As for Aileen, did she tell you about her bushwalking mate?
- [NICK *nods.*]
- JIM: With luck, they'll fall into a cavern measureless to man.
- [SUE *enters door left.*]
- SUE: All done. So we'll get you fed and then you should have a nap.
- JIM: And you and Nick can talk.
- SUE: No. I want you here for that, Dad. You're just as involved as I am. [*Sits on sofa, fuming.*] I just want to outline the situation. Then you can both say... whatever you say. It's very simple really. No it's not. It's... It's not simple. It's appalling. I have a crippled father. My mother's off with another man. I'm pregnant and the father doesn't want the baby and doesn't want to live with me. So I can give up my job and look after you and receive a carer's pension - which has to happen short term anyway. At least until I have the child.
- JIM: You're being a drama queen. I can look after myself.
- SUE: Of course you can't.
- JIM: And if I can't, that's life. Old age. Disease. Unwanted births and casual deaths. Humanity. Profanity. The cosmic comedy scores again.
- SUE: For God's sake, Dad, forget the philosophy. We have to be practical here. If we put you in a home, we have to pay a resident bond and we'd have to sell this house but if there's a divorce we'd have to wait till the settlement comes through and I'm going crazy with all this because I'm the one person left in this... family who's capable of... capable of... doing anything but I... don't know what to *do!*
- JIM: [*To NICK.*] I see two problems here. And the second one is, I'm still breathing. But, before I stop, I'd like to know *your* intentions, as there's a child to consider. I know marriage is the ultimate tragedy but I assume you're a responsible person? I suppose what I'm saying is... I prefer to die in peace.

*[They look at NICK who's feeling the pressure. PEGGY is now standing in doorway, listening, but they are too intent to spot her.]*

- NICK: [To SUE.] Looks like we need to be together.
- SUE: Meaning what?
- NICK: *[Hating it but doing the right thing.]*I... suppose we'd better... get married.
- PEGGY: *[With glee.]* How nice. The loving couple. D'you know he's got another trollop on the side?
- SUE: What?
- PEGGY: That's why he doesn't live with you. Ask him where he is on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.
- SUE: What are you raving about now?
- PEGGY: His client. Maggie Maggot. He's been doing disgusting things with her for years. Now it's all around the Foundation. Thanks to me.
- SUE: Is this...?
- NICK: *[His face and attitude confirm it.]* She... Look...
- SUE: *[In a rage.]*So I'm just your Monday and Friday lay, am I? *[Springs out of her chair and attacks him while the delighted PEGGY cackles.]*

*[Lights instantly to cold blue-white as all freeze in whatever position they have reached. The GUIDE enters stage right, contemplates the scene.]*

- GUIDE: Not good.

### **SCENE THREE:**

*The Hepworth's living-room two days later. Jim sits in his wheelchair stage centre left. He looks miserable, is pale, unkempt. Aileen sits on the sofa which is strewn with brochures and pieces of paper. She holds drink, is tipsy. She is looking at a brochure.*

JIM: I need to go to the toilet.

AILEEN: You've got your pappy nappy on. So piss yourself.

*[Pause.]*

JIM: What are you reading?

AILEEN: I'm not reading. I'm interacting with print.

JIM: *[Wearily.]* Jesus. I need to go to the *toilet*.

AILEEN: Tough. As far as I'm concerned, you can sit in your shit and starve.

JIM: Don't give a damn about anyone, do you?

AILEEN: You have a firm grasp of the obvious.

*[JIM tries to wheel himself toward the door with one arm. He jams the wheelchair into the table. It is hopeless. Then he spots his book in the waste paper basket, retrieves it with annoyance.]*

JIM: You threw this out again?

*[She ignores him. He puts the book back on the table.]*

JIM: Where's Sue?

AILEEN: Little miss tragic martyr? Rang to say she's sick. That's goosed your cook. Nick's coming around instead. So you'll have *him* balancing you on the toilet. Welcome to God's transit lounge.

JIM: At least you could have the decency to wheel me to the bathroom.

AILEEN: When I'm good and ready. And I'm not either. So suffer or bust.

*[She stares into distance, smiling. The light changes to rose and*

*she is spotlight, centre as MC (NICK) in spangled nightclub jacket vaults into the light to Ya-ta-da-ta-da-ta music and sounds of a well lubricated audience. She's imagining herself as a stand-up comic and now holds a radio microphone.]*

NICK: Aaaaand here she is, folks - star of stage, screen and cabaret. The fabulous Aileen Life-form.

*[She steps into spot, opens arms to audience applause, chucks MC under chin. During following we hear audience response to every line.]*

AILEEN: Only opens his mouth to change feet. Nice place this. See those exit signs? Apparently they're on the way out. That's my significant other down there. Got a kiss like a tonsillectomy. But useless at making money. Couldn't get a job as a wind-break. He applied for a position as speed-hump but flunked the intelligence test. Still, they say poverty's God's way of telling you you're a failure. Trouble is he costs me a fortune in food - eats anything on four legs except a chair. Then goes to sleep before his teeth hit the glass. And dreams he's a starving cannibal. His pillow's always gone in the morning. Anyway I went down to the chemist. They've got a sign that says: we dispense with accuracy'. And...

JIM: *[Yells]* I have to go to the toilet!

*[This shatters the dream. The light returns to normal. AILEEN on the couch as before.]*

AILEEN: You'll bloody have your lunch first. *[Gets up.]* Want it now? Or will you wait till I open the can?

JIM: Rotten bitch.

AILEEN: Pay-back time, Jimbo. And I'm loving it. *[Exits door.]*

JIM: *[Calls weakly.]* Peggy? Peg?

AILEEN: *[Off, yelling.]* Chisel-face. The old turd wants you.

*[JIM tries to wheel himself again, can't manage it, bangs the arm of his chair in frustration.]*

PEGGY: *[Yelling.]* You don't have to shout the house down. *[Her head appears around the door. To JIM]* What's your problem? Hurry up. I haven't got all day.

JIM: I need you to push me to the toilet. Your mother won't help.

PEGGY: That's her job. Not my job. Her job entirely. [*Turns to go.*]

JIM: [*Quietly desperate.*] Peggy...

PEGGY: Now what?

JIM: [*Trying to sooth her into helping him.*] Don't go, dear. Don't go. I'm sorry I'm bothering you. Please come here. It's very important to me. Peggy? Please?

PEGGY: [*Approaching warily.*] What are you after?

JIM: Nothing, dear. I just need some help. [*Grips her arm.*] You know my old black bag in the study? Under the table beside the filing cabinet. Can you bring it here?

PEGGY: Why should I?

JIM: [*Controlling himself.*] Just do this one thing for me, please. Be a good girl this once and do this for your dad.

PEGGY: [*Suspicious*] I don't know. What are you going to do with the bag?

JIM: I'll show you when you get it.

*[She pulls a face then exits door. He hangs his head.]*

*[The lights dim to rose. We hear heavenly choirs. JIM rises from his chair and walks forward. A white robed NUN [SUE] enters stage right, carrying pen and clip-board.]*

NUN: [*Irish accent.*] Merciful heavens. Not another suicide. Why did you do it, you silly sausage?

JIM: This can't be happening.

NUN: They all say that.

JIM: It's absurd.

NUN: What in heaven did you expect?

JIM: Oblivion. Or, if the worst came to the worst, to merge with the ocean of consciousness.

NUN: You poor heathen boy. Now, tell me, are the Muslims and the West still at war?

JIM: I believe there are new threats of stability.

NUN: Heaven be praised.

*[Severe black robed and hooded MONK [NICK] enters right, sees JIM and starts making sign of the cross.]*

MONK: *[Doleful.]* Corruptio optimi pessima dormitat. Homerus de nihilo nihilum in nihilum nil posse reverti ex quocunq̄ue capite...

NUN: For God's sake, Father, what's wrong now?

MONK: See you that darkness about his head?

NUN: I thought it was my astigmatism.

MONK: He is not of the flock.

NUN: He's in the wrong department? *[Stares at clipboard.]*

MONK: *[Takes clipboard and pen from her and strikes out entry with pen.]* He's a degenerate type destined to repeat his life exactly for eternity.

JIM: God, NO!

NUN: For shame, Father. You've scared the poor love witless. *[Retrieves clipboard and looks at it.]* Surely we can fit him in somewhere else?

MONK: *[Shakes head.]* The law of fate is irrevocable.

NUN: Poor Love. Don't fret. I'll try some intercessionary prayer. Please, Lord, don't let two and two make four.

*[A thunderclap and wailing voices.]*

Not working, I'm afraid. He's been in a foul mood ever since Easter.

*[MONK and NUN quickly exit right. JIM falls on his knees and raises his hands in a silent howl as strange lights strobe about*

*him. A second thunderclap and blackout.]*

*[Lights to normal. JIM back where he was in the chair.]*

JIM: *[Shakes his head, grimly smiling.]* Ridiculous. At least I won't have to worry about all that.

*[Peggy comes back with case.]*

JIM: Thank you very much, dear. That's sweet of you. Now, could you do one more thing? Could you get me a glass of water?

*[PEGGY looks at him suspiciously, exits arch. With his good arm, he manages to open bag, takes out bottle of pills a hypodermic and a small glass vial, finding each with some trouble. PEGGY comes back with the water.]*

PEGGY: *[Curious.]* You're going to kill yourself, are you?

JIM: That's right.

PEGGY: Not before time if you ask me.

JIM: Would you like to help?

PEGGY: Don't know.

JIM: Just do this last thing for me and I won't bother you ever again.

PEGGY: That'd be a change. *[Hesitates.]*

JIM: Please, dear.

PEGGY: *[Shrugs.]* At least it's something different.

JIM: Take the end of this, then. *[Hands her the syringe.]* Good girl. *[Passes her the small bottle.]* Now you push the needle through the rubber stopper, tip the bottle upside down and pull back the plunger to suck it out.

PEGGY: Don't rush me. Don't rush me. I do things in my own good time.

JIM: Of course you do, dear. No hurry at all. That's the way. Very good. Very good indeed.

- PEGGY: Now what?
- JIM: Just take the top off this jar for me. I have to swallow those pills.
- PEGGY: You'll choke to death! *[Does it.]*
- JIM: Not if you give me the water.
- PEGGY: Go on then. Swallow them. Hurry up. I'm missing my program.
- [JIM lifts bottle to his lips, swallows some of the tablets - points at the glass making sounds for it. AILEEN appears at the arch. She just watches. PEGGY hands the water. He gulps, then swallows second lot of tablets.]*
- PEGGY: *[Helping him with the water.]* To be perfectly frank, I'm glad to see the back of you. In my book, you're getting off lightly.
- JIM: *[Tightens watch strap on paralysed arm.]* If you say so. Now it'll be quite quick with this. *[Picks up syringe and injects himself in vein on back of hand.]*
- PEGGY: *[Does it.]* Can I go, now? I'm missing my program.
- JIM: Yes, that's the lot. You're a good girl. Thank you very much.
- PEGGY: I try to be helpful. But does anyone notice? No. *[Exits door.]*
- [Syringe falls to floor. JIM sags in chair. AILEEN enters arch, walks over to him.]*
- AILEEN: Why didn't you do it years ago, instead of wasting my life? *[Kicks his leg hard but he does not respond.]*
- [Sound of key in front door lock. AILEEN looks up, startled, hurries out of room, exits door before NICK enters arch.]*
- NICK: Jim? You asleep? *[Sees the syringe and situation. Crouches beside him to look at pills, check his pulse - dashes to the phone, lifts it, dials.]* Emergency? Hello?

**SCENE FOUR:**

*The Hepworth's living-room three weeks later. JIM sits in his wheelchair - disoriented, grinning, tapping and flailing occasionally with his good arm. He has brain damage, cannot speak but can mumble and does this through the scene. The room is half tidy. Two large suitcases beside door at left.*

*[AILEEN enters from door with smaller case and two plastic bags, puts them down near other luggage. She is smartly dressed, has never looked better - a bit tizzed but quite attractive, and happy. She crosses room and sits down on the edge of the sofa expectantly, looks at her watch.]*

*[SUE enters from door.]*

SUE: When's he picking you up?

AILEEN: Any time now.

SUE: I can't believe you're doing this to him.

AILEEN: Should be tickled pink. But you're so busy looking at life through morose-coloured glasses...

SUE: What do you expect when dad's still... sitting there? *[To JIM]* Now I'm running your bath and I don't want any nonsense.

AILEEN: You'll get it. He's a veg. Talk about better heads on cabbages. Where's that clipping? *[Searches in her purse and finds it.]* I love this. *[Quotes loudly, with relish.]* 'Miracle machine saves inventor from death'. *[Guffaws.]* Isn't that one of life's heart-warming little twists? I asked them to pull the plug, you know, but no banana. So there he sits. Brainless as a chook. Jimbo in limbo. And he's all yours - until you park him in a home for the bewildered.

SUE: I'm in two minds about that.

AILEEN: *[Snorts]* Give you a month.

SUE: I don't abandon my family like you.

AILEEN: Ooo. OOoo. You loving soul. All the pitiful bastard wanted to was exhibit his mortality. Now he's a leaking bag of guts, thanks to stupid bloody Nick.

SUE: At least he's alive.

AILEEN: Call that living?

SUE: [*Defiantly squaring up to her.*] And I'm thrilled he's still with us. And I'll nurse him, for months, if I have to.

AILEEN: [*Sarcastically.*] God love you, dear.

SUE: Not for God. For him!

AILEEN: You poetic soul. So for the asinine self-acclaim of feeling good about your intentions, you're prepared to suffer hell for a cats-meat cortex that doesn't even know you? You goose!

[*SUE exits arch.*]

AILEEN: [*Waves at JIM.*] Hi, Jimbo. Crap all over everything, mate. That's the way to get attention.

[*Car horn. Aileen springs up and trots through arch right.*]

That's it. I'm off like a whore's drawers.

[*Sound of front door opening, then closing.*]

[*SUE returns through arch with tea-towel and dish, goes to door French window's to look out. On the way past her father, he pinches her bottom, sickening her.*]

SUE: Dad!

[*Cackle from JIM*]

[*AILEEN comes back through arch.*]

AILEEN: Just a taxi for next-door.

SUE: [*Remembering.*] The bath! [*Runs out through door.*]

[*AILEEN sits on sofa again, checks her watch, smiles.*]

*[The lights go to amber, not rose, as this is a real remembrance, not a daydream. We hear the voice of her friend, which can be recorded, and she answers him on stage. Alternately, NICK OR GUIDE can be the voice off - whoever can alter pitch enough.]*

VOICE: *[Deep, male voice.]* Wait till you see it, old love. Two great National Parks north and south. You can start at Kianinny Bay and walk around nine K along the coast to the lake. A huge variety of flora - right there, on the coast.

AILEEN: Sounds beautiful.

VOICE: There are spots where the Melaleuca and Kunzia cover the track like a cathedral, and the trunks creak in the wind like old gates. Then there are perfect little inlets. Red rocks and blue sea. And no one around at all.

AILEEN: Sounds great.

VOICE: I'll show you the biggest bottlebrush you've ever seen - right there on the coast. It's magic.

AILEEN: I'm just scared something'll go wrong. You sure you're ready to leave her?

VOICE: I deserve to make the break - just like you. She's so neat she drives me up the wall. Always dusting her Royal Doulton...

AILEEN: Tell her to use her knickers. Saves on talc.

VOICE: *[Chuckle.]* You're incredible. Your language just kills me.

AILEEN: You're sure you're going through with this?

VOICE: Told you. I'll pick you up Thursday at two on the dot. Mind you, I'm not looking forward to telling her. She could go any way, you follow? Funny. If you met her, you'd probably like her a lot.

AILEEN: Like her to be hit by a flying brick shithouse.

VOICE: *[Laughs.]*

*[Lights to normal. AILEEN'S dreamy smile becomes a frown as*

*she looks at her watch again.]*

*[PEGGY enters through door - in same nightdress and with empty cookie jar.]*

PEGGY: You still here?

AILEEN: Gawd. It's the Human Tabasco back again. Going to kiss your sainted mother goodbye?

PEGGY: Good riddance to bad rubbish is what I say. *[Pokes tongue out at her.]*

*[The phone rings and PEGGY, who is near it, picks it up automatically but AILEEN leaps up and grabs it from her.]*

AILEEN: Get your claws off that, you ghoul.

*[PEGGY scuttles through arch before AILEEN'S kick connects.]*

*[Into phone.]* Hello? John? *[Checks watch again.]* It's half past bloody two. I've been sitting here, packed, and pickled since man first domesticated rice. *[Listens, her face slowly changing.]* You can't... do it to her? What do you mean, you can't do it?

*[Puts phone back on the hook slowly, quietly, grabs decanter off the sideboard, exits French windows.]*

*[PEGGY, enters from arch with full cookie jar as SUE comes back through door.]*

SUE: Peg, can you help me get Dad into the bath?

PEGGY: That's your job. Not mine. Where's the sewer? Her bags are still here. I thought the disgusting thing had gone.

SUE: Either help me with dad or go back to your room. And have a shower and wash that nightie. You smell like prawns.

PEGGY: Little miss goodie two-shoes. You'll get yours. Your time'll come. Mark my words.

SUE: *[With surge of temper.]* Stinking useless... Get out of here.

*[SUE shoves her toward door left.]*

PEGGY: Don't you touch me. Don't you touch me. I'll hit you. I'll hit you. I'll hit you.

SUE: [*Screaming.*] Get out! [*Shoves her through the door. Exit PEGGY.*]

[*SUE approaches her father, still angry, trying to control her words.*]

I suppose you've wet your pants again? God, dad, you make it hard. [*Stands with hand on table, breathing deeply, at tether's end.*] Now, I'm going to put you on the toilet first and I want you to go. Not just sit there. [*As she starts to wheel him off stage, he tries to pinch her again and she slaps at his hand.*] Stop that. I'm your daughter for God's sake. [*Stops wheeling, walks away from him almost beside herself.*] Oh, God, I can smell it already. [*Turns around to him.*] What am I going to do with you? [*Clenching her fists to control herself, turns back at him, wheels him toward door.*] Now, we're going to the toilet and I don't want any nonsense! [*They exit.*]

[*Off.*] Stop... grinning!

## SCENE FIVE:

*The REALITY INSTITUTE again with the desk two chairs, weathercock and signal lever in front of the darkened main set. The GUIDE removes his hands from NICK's head.*

GUIDE: Well I think that's as far as we need to go. I mean, into your future. Don't you?

NICK: Christ, yes! I'm gutted. Jesus! I don't want to bloody get married. Or to turn him into a vegetable? Or to have the stupid cow looking after him. Jesus!

GUIDE: Yes. No bright perspectives there. [*Walks around to the seat behind his desk again.*]

NICK: You realise the Maggie thing's just sex? As for Sue. Christ! She's off with the pixies. Stupid bitch.

GUIDE: *[Sits and taps his fingers together.]* People confuse love with the reaction called emotion. It's like confusing a concerto with the sound of a dropped piano.

NICK: *[Gets up and paces in some agitation.]* God, what a mess. At least I've seen it. Know not to go there.

GUIDE: But you will. Because you'll forget. And react exactly the same way.

NICK: Forget?

GUIDE: Everyone forgets. We have these nice big brains but don't know how to use them.

NICK: So how do you use a brain?

GUIDE: Well, to start with, don't clutter it with thought. *[He lifts a hand mirror from the table and points the mirrored surface to NICK.]* Then hold a mirror up to yourself. Of course, you need a special kind of mirror. Like this one. *[He hands the mirror to NICK who takes it and views himself with concern.]* What do you see?

NICK: *[Looking in the mirror.]* That I'm just thoughts, habits and reactions. Each one catches me and I'm gone. *[Puts the mirror back on the table, distressed.]*

GUIDE: *[Gravely.]* Yes. We identify with everything. Lose our sense of ourselves with every impact. It's like trying to keep water in a bucket full of holes.

NICK: So how do you plug the holes?

GUIDE: Reaction can't fix reaction.

NICK: But there has to be a way to do it.

GUIDE: Lau Tzu said it centuries ago. The way to do... is to be. In other words, not to be dragged into the process of your life.

*[NICK picks up mirror again but the GUIDE gently takes it from him.]*

You have to hold your own mirror. Not mine. Can you manage? Are you trying now?

NICK: I've been trying to... try it. But the next moment, I'm just thinking again.

GUIDE: Yes, we either think - or experience.

NICK: Why's it so hard to be simple?

GUIDE: [*Smiles.*] Because we have a lot to unlearn.

NICK: But what you've just showed me starts tomorrow. There's no time to unlearn anything.

GUIDE: True. [*Gets up and moves toward the signal lever.*] So, this time, I'll be there to remind you at the critical times.

NICK: To remind me of what?

GUIDE: To hold a mirror to yourself.

NICK: Won't they see you?

GUIDE: Of course not. People don't see anything real. You'll see me. But no one else will. That's if you agree.

NICK: Anything's better than going through that again.

GUIDE: Very well. Let's try. [*He moves the lever to the other end of its travel.*] And this time, be careful. Because whatever happens you'll be stuck with.

**SCENE SIX:**

*This scene a reprise of Act 1 Scene 2. Early morning glow. Sound of a stream and bird calls. The desk a tent. They are back on their holiday.*

[*She blows ant off the rim of her bowl.*]

NICK: What are you doing?

SUE: Blowing off an ant.

NICK: You just trod on a hundred.

[GUIDE *walks slowly in with his mirror - SUE can't see him but NICK can - as scene continues.*]

SUE: If I did, it was unintentional and motivation's the first rule of morality. My father wrote a book called '*All that Breathes*' that says we should preserve all life.

NICK: [*He picks up can of Mussels and the GUIDE holds the mirror in front of him. He puts it down again.*]

SUE: What?

NICK: Nothing.

[GUIDE *steps back.*]

[*They eat.*]

NICK: [*Trying to be aware of himself.*] Beautiful here.

SUE: [*Grateful for a sensible comment.*] Lovely spot. You *do* like me a little, don't you?

NICK: [*Stroking her hair.*] Was nice last night.

[*The lights dim to rose spotlight highlighting NICK. SUE immobile but NICK stands and addresses audience again.*]

NICK: [*Laconic.*] Good evening. You're now seeing me on TV world-wide because...

[GUIDE *holds up mirror.*]

NICK: [*Seeing himself.*] Oh, God.

[*Rose light becomes normal.*]

SUE: Nick?

NICK: Mmm?

SUE: There's no good time to tell you this.

NICK: Tell me what?

[GUIDE *is ready with his mirror.*]

SUE: I'm... pregnant.

[*Lights to cold blue and SUE freezes.*]

GUIDE: Be careful now.

NICK: What do I do? What do I *do*?

GUIDE: Do? Remember. The hardest thing's to do nothing. Be non-committal. Don't draw fire.

[*Lights to normal and SUE unfreezes.*]

NICK: Pregnant?

SUE: [*About to cry.*] You're supposed to be pleased.

NICK: [*Gets up, moves away.*] Is it... what you want?

SUE: Depends on you.

[GUIDE *training his mirror on NICK.*]

I want us to be together Nick. In a real way. I really want that.

NICK: [*Comes back and holds her hand, goes to speak and shuts his mouth again.*] Okay. Bit of a shock. Give me a bit of time to get used to the idea. Okay?

SUE: [*Strained pause. She bites her lip, angry, starts packing things.*] All right.

[NICK *looks at GUIDE who nods.*]

**SCENE SEVEN:**

*The living-room of the Hepworth's home. We revisit the crucial times in scenes we've seen before. In the first, AILEEN has just left and JIM and NICK have been talking to each other. GUIDE stands by with his mirror.*

*[SUE comes back in through the French windows, leading PEGGY by the hand.]*

SUE: She was down at the bottom of the block beside Mum's favourite tree. *[To PEGGY]* Silly old thing. But we've had a good talk. She's decided to stay. *[Encouraging her.]* Haven't you, Peg?

PEGGY: *[Regally.]* I may.

JIM: *[Rises from his chair and puts his arm around her.]* That's my girl. Don't let your mother get the best of you.

PEGGY: Then I may not. It depends.

SUE: Peg. This is Nick.

PEGGY: *[To NICK.]* Oh, yes? I've heard things about you - not all of them good.

JIM: How it going at the Foundation, Peg?

PEGGY: I'm still employed if that's what you want to know.

*[GUIDE is moving forward, mirror up.]*

JIM: Good girl.

SUE: *[To NICK.]* She works at the Outreach Foundation office.

NICK: *[Suddenly aware he must not say too much or he will give her a lead.]* Oh, yes?

SUE: Peg! Come on. I want you to help me in the kitchen.

PEGGY: Wait till I put my bag away. [*Lifts it and exits door.*]

NICK: I'll help.

SUE: No. You're more use here. [*Exit's doorway left.*]

*[Instantly to blue light as JIM freezes]*

NICK: God! That was close.

GUIDE: Well done. Now they've nothing to attack you with later.

NICK: I suppose you don't think much of my morals. I mean, having two women.

GUIDE: Don't vanish into what people think of you.

NICK: I forget every moment. Even with you here.

GUIDE: Keep trying. Are you ready to go on?

NICK: I'll do my best.

GUIDE: Remember - try to keep your attention inside yourself. Don't let it go out to things. [*Moves his hands toward his own body.*] Stay in here.

*[The blue light fades to black, then lights comes up again. It is the Hepworth's living room that evening. All seated as before after dinner. The GUIDE watches calmly.]*

AILEEN: [*Bumps her hip into NICK on her way back to the chair.*] How's the ad-game, lover? What crap are you flogging now?

NICK: Imported Champagne.

JIM: Why did you go into advertising?

NICK: Couldn't do anything else. [*He is trying to be aware of himself.*]

SUE: [To PEGGY, *sotto*.] Filthy thing. Don't pick your nose.

PEGGY: Don't tell me what to do. Think you're so holy. Holy? You've disgusting. Exposing your private parts to men.

AILEEN: [*Leans to side, farts loudly*.] Ah. Better out than in.

SUE: Mum. Was that *you*? MUM?

JIM: She's hardly your after-dinner fantasy.

AILEEN: It's a natural function. [To NICK.] What's up with you, lover? You're very quiet. Turning into a bore.

[*Instantly to blue light as all freeze.*]

GUIDE: So we're not quite there yet. Do you remember I told you to act? To change nothing externally? To act the part of Nick?

NICK: But then I'm back into my usual stupid stuff.

GUIDE: Not easy to live in two worlds at once. [*He's strolling around, inspecting them all again.*] Remember what I told you. Stay inside yourself, contained. But act your part, your usual nonsense, so no one notices. Understand?

[*Blue light back to normal and they unfreeze.*]

AILEEN: [To NICK.] I wrote a poem about farting.

NICK: [*Acting himself.*] Is it delicate and subtly expressive?

AILEEN: Au contraire. It's tentative, thoughtful, questioning, with a tragic conclusion.

NICK: I'm distending with anticipation.

AILEEN: [*Declaims.*]

Why on earth did God propose,  
That hot air rises to the nose,  
And nostrils angle down as well  
The better to inhale the smell?  
Discern from this your cosmic status.

A being designed - to smell its flatus.

[SUE and PEGGY *disgusted.*]

NICK: Sublime. Like the music of the spheres.

[GUIDE *is nodding to him.*]

PEGGY: Disgusting filthy sewer. [To NICK.] So you've inseminated her with your filthy prong, are you going to make an honest woman of her?

NICK: [Looks at SUE *inquiringly, thinking she's told PEGGY.* SUE *slightly shakes her head to deny it.*] Lovely weather we're having.

AILEEN: [To PEGGY.] What are you raving about? [To SUE.] You pregnant?

SUE: Yes.

[AILEEN and JIM *surprised.*]

PEGGY: [Jeering *laugh.*] I found out. I always do.

AILEEN: [To NICK.] So now what?

NICK: [Still *aware of himself.*] We'll let you know.

[GUIDE *nods slowly.*]

[Lights *fade to black then up again. It's the Hepworth's living-room, several weeks' later. The GUIDE stands by. NICK and now wheelchair-bound JIM in scene.*]

[SUE *enters via door.*]

SUE: All done. So we'll get you fed and then I think you should have a rest.

JIM: And you and Nick can have your talk.

SUE: No. I want you here, Dad. You're just as involved. [Sits on sofa, *fuming.*] I just want to outline the situation. Then you can both say... whatever you say. It's very simple really. No it's not. It's not simple. It's... It's appalling. I have a crippled father. My mother's going to live with another man. I'm pregnant and [to NICK] I still have no idea how you see things. I can give up my job and look

after Dad which has to happen short term anyway. At least till I have the child.

JIM: I see two problems here. And the second one's I'm still breathing. [*Looks at NICK.*] And, before I stop, I'd like to know your intentions.

*[They both look at him. He is feeling the pressure. PEGGY is now standing in doorway, listening. But they are too intent to spot her. The GUIDE is ready with his mirror.]*

*[Instantly to blue light as SUE, JIM, PEGGY freeze.]*

NICK: [*To GUIDE.*] What do I say?

GUIDE: I'm not going to tell you.

NICK: But I don't know what to say.

GUIDE: [*Moves his hands down in front of his own chest.*] Because you still trust your thoughts. Try to respond from the whole of yourself. [*Watching him keenly.*] Are you trying it?

NICK: Yes.

GUIDE: Ready then?

*[NICK nods.]*

*[Lights to normal again and the others unfreeze.]*

SUE: Well?

NICK: [*Takes his time, very contained, to SUE:*] You know I'm fond of you but I'm not prepared to live with someone just now. Perhaps that's my weakness. It's no reflection on you. It's simply what I feel I need for myself. Of course if you want the child I'll support it and help you as much as I can. But you need to know that, if you have it, you're doing it for yourself. Not for me.

PEGGY: [*With glee.*] See? See? He doesn't want you. Or your brat.

SUE: [*Gets up and chases PEGGY.*] Rotten vicious bitch...

*[PEGGY, now the focus of all her frustration has the good sense*

*to exit fast. SUE comes back, looks daggers at NICK. The GUIDE is ready with his mirror.]*

JIM: Well, I can't say I'm surprised.

SUE: *[To NICK]* You're so damned selfish. This is about your *child*.

NICK: You don't have to have it.

SUE: Life's sacred.

NICK: *[Still contained.]* In principle. But we're talking three lives here. Not one.

SUE: *[Enraged]* So! That's it?

NICK: I've told you how I see it. I've tried to be as honest as I can.

*[SUE bawls, rushes from the room, exits door left. JIM shakes his head.]*

*[Strained silence. NICK walks out into the garden.]*

*[GUIDE nods.]*

*[Lights fade to black then up again. It's the Hepworth's living-room, after PEGGY has aided JIM'S suicide. Just before NICK comes in and finds him. The GUIDE is standing by.]*

PEGGY: *[Does it.]* Can I go, now? I'm missing my program.

JIM: Yes, dear. That's the lot. You're a good girl. Thank you so much.

PEGGY: I try to be helpful. But does anyone notice? No. *[Exits arch.]*

*[Syringe falls to floor. JIM sags in chair. AILEEN enters arch, walks over to him.]*

AILEEN: Why didn't you do it years ago, instead of wasting my life? *[Kicks his leg hard but he does not respond.]*

*[Sound of key in front door lock. AILEEN looks up, startled, hurries out of room, exits door before NICK enters arch.]*

NICK: Jim? You asleep? [*Sees the syringe and situation. Crouches beside him to look at pills, check his pulse - dashes to the phone, lifts it. The GUIDE approaches with the mirror. NICK finally remembers to be aware of himself. He slowly puts the handset down, walks back to arch. We hear the front door open and click shut.*]

### SCENE EIGHT:

*A spotlit scene at side of stage. A small cafe table and two chairs. NICK seated on one. We hear suburban street sounds. What he's been shown is not quite gone. When he glances at his watch, the way he does it shows us he is trying to stay aware of himself. He gets up, aware of the movement, almost about to go when SUE enters.*

NICK: Thought you'd stood me up.

SUE: What you deserve. [*Sits, agitated, full of resentment.*] I need a coffee or I'll die.

NICK: [*Gestures to off-stage waiter*] Another flat white, thanks.

SUE: At least you came to the funeral. I suppose ten people look more than nine.

NICK: Wanted to come. I liked him. And I thought the service was good.

SUE: Except for Peggy spitting on the coffin. And me having to lie through my teeth about why Mum wasn't there.

NICK: She's not in hospital?

SUE: On a cruise. Having a fling with another old lecher she's met. Just got a postcard from Noumea. From the spelling, she's blind drunk. My family! God! GOD!

NICK: And how's the growing concern?

SUE: [*Pointedly*] I assume you're referring to your child? Rotten bastard. [*Pause*] You remember the afternoon I asked you to help Dad? I

was sick that afternoon. Remember? You don't, do you? Of course you don't, insensitive prick. [*Looks away, fuming, too angry to speak.*] I miscarried that night.

NICK: U-huh.

SUE: I tell myself it was meant to happen. Over and over. Meant to happen. Except that most things seem to happen for no reason. God, what a world! Mum's right about one thing. We're in hell. Pathetic! GOD!

NICK: I'd say I'm sorry. But...

SUE: ...You'd be lying because you're suddenly, blissfully off the hook. You're so transparent. Which brings me to this pathetic relationship. As far as I'm concerned, you're a disaster who's wasted two years of my life. And I'm over you. Utterly through with you. Am I making myself clear? I'm a decent, feeling person who never harmed anybody and who now has no idea what on earth she ever saw in you. I must have been out of my tree. Are you listening to this at all?

NICK: Yes.

SUE: Great. Great. So I'm moving on. [*Gets up. Shrill. All her chronic resentment on display*] I never really liked you because you're a user and a smartarse. Who puts everyone down to disguise his utter, utter mediocrity. A narrow, nasty little twit of no interest to anyone at all. Selfish, small-minded, despicable. A total pain in the arse. And I hope you have a lousy, dreary life featuring loads of bad luck and rotten health and lose your hair and teeth and die hideously from something excruciating like... cancer of the larynx. You hear me? You *HEAR* me?

NICK: I get the drift.

[*SUE, furious at getting no reaction, kicks his leg, stomps off, exits.*]

[*NICK sits for a moment, rubs his leg, gets slowly up.*]

**SCENE NINE:**

*Back to the REALITY INSTITUTE. Same stark desk and two chairs, weathercock, signal box lever - top-lit for dramatic effect. NICK walking up and down while GUIDE watches from his chair at desk.*

NICK: ...and said she hated me and pissed off. Roger over and out.

GUIDE: A lucky escape.

NICK: Was it ever!

GUIDE: Even the smallest change to the cause makes a big difference to the effect.

NICK: *[He touches the signal lever.]* I'll never understand you. *[As the other just watches him steadily, he shakes his head, becoming a little emotional.]* The more you tell me, the less I know.

GUIDE: You're not used to the taste of reality. It's like being emptied out . *[Looks at his watch, gets up.]* Sorry, but I have another appointment.

NICK: I need to pay you.

GUIDE: You need to pay... attention. It's the only energy that evolves. The real power of mind is attention. Not thought. So practise.

NICK: I try. But the next second I'm gone - caught in another thought or emotion.

*[Walks toward the weathercock, turns it.]*

So I need to find some... wordless... centre in myself without... becoming... self-centred?

GUIDE: As good a description as any.

NICK: But I can't do it without your help.

GUIDE: No one can help. They can only give indications. You have to do this for yourself.

NICK: But, every breath, I forget.

GUIDE: See how complex simple things are? I'm sorry, but I have another appointment.

NICK: Will I find your door again?

GUIDE: If you keep sincerely trying, you'll always find the door.

*[Moves stage left as if to open the door.]*

*[They exchange a strong look. NICK exits left.]*

*[When he is gone, the GUIDE gathers himself, then goes extreme stage left and beckons.]*

Yes, come through. Please don't be afraid. Mrs Grey, is it? This way, please.

*[He is conducting the woman to the chair but, for some reason, we can't see her. He pulls the chair out for her, leaves pauses for her speech.]*

...Do sit down. So! How did you find us? ...A radio interview? Interesting. We don't do interviews. Now try to let tensions drop.

*[He moves around and sits behind his desk.]*

So, forgive me, but I need to ask this. What do you want?

Yes. *[Pause]* Yes. I think what you're trying to say is - you find there's nothing you can call yourself. It's true. We're probably invisible to a higher form of life because, objectively, we don't exist.

Please, dear lady, calm yourself. *[Nods.]* I know. I know.

*[Gets up, beginning to move around behind the other's chair.]*

It's quite all right. Lots of our clients cry. *[He listens for a moment. Her genuine need has touched him.]* Yes, we do care. If we didn't, why would we go to this trouble? *[He's now behind her.]* So sit quite still. Relax. *[Places his hands around her head.]* And let's examine this life of yours.

## CURTAIN

### PRODUCTION NOTE:

The **GUIDE** is a person of presence - attentive and objective. He/she is relaxed, neutral, empty of personal reactions, aware at all times of posture, gesture, movement, facial expression, tone of voice. This gives his/her words and actions weight.

The other actors play in the usual way except for **NICK** who, through the evening, begins to understand the effort to remain behind his manifestations.

Note that the REALITY INSTITUTE scenes, and anything in **blue** light, are played seriously, intensely. **Rose** light, as indicated later, stands for daydreams and **amber** for the single flashback.

### **Thematic aspects:**

LIFE CLASS is based on the idea that we cannot reach a higher level - because our lower aspects are disharmonised. In other words, we live in a kind of waking sleep because we identify with things. And, as nothing in us stands apart, our actions are reactions.

The psyche has three aspects - mind, body and emotions. These need to be balanced for anything finer to appear. Generally people have a preponderance of one or the other and see life from that aspect only. (Nutty professor. Sybarite. Drama queen.) The play attempts to present each type - so represents the human condition.

**Jim is the intellectual type.** He has grand theories but not the courage of his convictions because he lacks emotional force and practical application. He is a well-meaning hypocrite because he knows everything but can do nothing.

**Aileen is the physical type.** Her energy and ranting is, in fact, inertia. She is self-indulgent, practical, trapped - allays despair with sex, drink and derision. Nothing can satisfy her because she looks outside herself. She is the centre of the universe. For her, it is always the other person's fault.

**Sue is the emotional type.** She is, by turns, affectionate, sentimental, affronted, hysterical. She is unaware that the negative emotions she mistakes for sincerity, are always partial. Beneath her surface congeniality is a short fuse. She takes everything personally and disguises her chronic resentments with tinsel-thin brightness.

With the exception of the damaged **Peg**, who is a plot device, the characters can also be seen as parts of one person. **Aileen** is body, **Sue** emotion, **Jim** mind. And **Nick**, rather badly represents potential - the fairytale hero, the questing prince. The **Guide**, on this level, is the higher nature. It is always there, but can do nothing unless the prodigal returns. It waits, called unfailingly by any genuine effort toward something more inclusive.

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