

A young woman with freckles is looking out a window covered in rain. She is wearing a dark sweater and has her hand near her chin. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting her face against the dark, rainy background.

A COMEDY OF MISDIRECTION

Michael Bedford

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The play is structured into two acts and there are four lead roles. Firstly, a brother and sister (Gary and Mary) who both look to play the part of matchmaker, though for widely different reasons. Secondly, their two hapless friends (Alice and Ted), who are the subject of Gary and Mary's attentions.

The play is written in rhyme and the script is formatted to reflect this. The pace of the play is meant to be lively throughout, say, in the manner of a restoration comedy. The main characters break the fourth wall from the outset.

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Cast of Characters

- Gary Age late twenties or above. Mary's brother. Confident and self-assured at the outset, but his insecurities emerge as the play unfolds.
- Mary Age late twenties or above. Gary's sister.
- Ted Age late twenties or above. Dresses very 'retro' in tank tops, flares, large collars, and platform shoes.
- Alice Age late twenties or above. John's sister. Thinks she is even tempered but gets irritated quickly, albeit in a light-hearted way.
- Stan Friend of Gary and Ted.
- Bill Friend of Gary and Ted.
- Tom Friend of Gary and Ted.
- Annabelle Alice's friend. Always dressed well. Fully made up, always concerned about her appearance.
- Barbara Alice's friend. Very romantic. Wears long flowing dresses.
- June Alice's friend. A scientist. Very neat clothing but dour. Wears a jacket and thick glasses.
- Bertha Alice's friend. A philosopher. Dresses like a dishevelled academic.
- John Alice's brother. A criminal. Taller than Edwin or Seth. Speaks slowly and precisely. Menacing.
- Robb John's employee. A criminal.
- Edwin Seth's brother. A criminal. Well-built but smaller than John.
- Seth Edwin's brother. A criminal. Well-built but smaller than John.
- Official Male or female.

Voice of Mary's husband (offstage)*

Voice 1 from audience – male*

Voice 2 from audience – male or female*

Voice 3 from audience – female*

*Voices could be played by any of the cast members other than the four main characters of Gary, Mary, Ted or Alice.

Play Notes

Setting

There are few specific requirements allowing the set to be as elaborate or spartan as the production requires. One specified element is a large, six-seater farmhouse table situated stage left which appears in many scenes.

Time

The present.

Other Notes

Musical interludes: There are four musical interludes in the play. Although set in the present, the music should be an older more folk-based style allowing the cast to join in singing. The pace of the play is lively throughout and the music should both complement and enhance this feel. It is envisaged these interludes would provide the opportunity to make set changes on stage.

The parties: There are three parties in the play around which the plot revolves. These are relatively restrained affairs with background characters mainly standing and speaking to each other. Any music during the party scenes should be of low volume.

Audience: There is a close connection with the audience throughout, and the four main characters all speak directly to the audience. In one scene, three members of the cast are placed in the audience to deliver lines to an actor onstage. It is suggested that the three cast members are dressed in their stage clothes to clearly set them apart from other members of the audience, otherwise people may think they have *carte blanche* to shout up at the stage.

Rhyme: The play is written in rhyme using a variety of rhyming structures. For the informal rhyming structures, the director/players are entirely at liberty as to how much they wish to stress or not stress the rhyming word. For the individual speeches written in iambic pentameter, where the rhyme is placed on the line end, the delivery may be more influenced by the formal structure of these sections.

ACT 1

ACT I

SCENE 1

Stage darkened. TED is sat at a table downstage left in darkness. He is still. GARY enters and walks to downstage. GARY speaks directly to the audience.

GARY Under normal circumstances, we might meet perhaps in passing, bump in the street and go on our way. And as we walked towards our destination would not think to stop and talk or share any thoughts at all. But as you are littering my floor and we've blocked the stairs and locked the doors it seems incumbent on me to perhaps try at least to make your stay here passible. If not a feast of entertainment, then nibbles or a small snack. So, forget any hopes of claiming money back. But where to start? As a prelude to this mayhem I will recite a short, but relevant poem.
Yes, just that. By way of filling any plot in, and goodwill to let you know precisely how the evening is to go downhill. Our story, is about the simple pleasures that friendship can bring. I'll begin.
(pause)
What soul could be so drab as to deny the sweet delight in others misfortune?
Who has not wept with a crocodile eye or feigned support humming a different tune?
The greatest prize can be an empty haul if most of our peers are sure to follow.
Success is not a bitter pill at all provided only we get to swallow.
So when bad luck descends our ears in place to extract every detail that it can, and if their grief is not quite to our taste good friends we are, even give it a hand.
Though we may not wish them serious strife trouble's such good sport in another's life.
(pause)
So you get the gist. Excellent. Well, I have this friend.

(clicks fingers. Spotlight goes on TED who is now walking downstage past a full-length mirror. He stops and glances at the mirror. Then, after checking around, makes a brief movement and observes himself. After a short pause, he then starts to make increasingly outlandish movements. Unbeknown to him, a woman is walking from behind and when she is level with TED she looks over. He immediately stops. She shakes her head and walks offstage. His head falls abruptly with his chin dramatically hitting his chest.)

GARY As you can see, if a building, he would be condemned.
But more importantly, that seemingly, gormless idiot you see there
has more than once, cost me dear.
So by any reasonable measure, I owe him one.
Which is how this tale began its run.
But no-one could have forecast the trouble and sheer complexity
which would arise from a prank which started so harmlessly.
Yet isn't that the way? The most dreadful chaos grown
from some innocuous seed once so innocently sown.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT 1

SCENE 2

Musical interlude.

A party. People are stood talking. GARY is standing with STAN, BILL, and TOM stage right. TED is stood some distance away stage left talking to no-one but doing the 'TED dance'. This is an odd dance where both arms move in unison, and he seems to hop from foot to foot, whilst concentrating on his limited movements intently.

STAN Great party, Gary! As always, *the* place to go.
You certainly know
how to put on these things.
I wouldn't know where to start or anything.
But where's Annabelle tonight?
I presume she got an invite?

GARY Well that is a sorry story
She was going to be here but that's history.
Do you see Ted over there, dressed for the sixties,
crumpled man, un-ironed shirt, arse hung out of his britches?
We went for drinks a few days ago. Left him and Annabelle talking.
Mixed up who she was! How long have we been going out? Started calling
her Susan, a 'passing acquaintance' I had met the week before
which was all entirely innocent....

TOM Entirely innocent, I'm sure.

GARY So, when I came back
pockets full of crisps, drinks, and other crap
things kicked off. From out of nowhere, accusations and swear words, well....

BILL She kicked your arse and gave you hell?

*(GARY pauses, looks vaguely annoyed, then nods,
resigned)*

GARY She kicked my arse and gave me hell.
So now I am knee deep in flowers and chocolate

GARY (ctd) finding new and previously, unknown ways of showing regret
despite the fact that I have done nothing!
All due to memory man who apparently tells everybody everything!
Who of course himself is resolutely single
with no hint of any such trouble.
Scott-free at every turn
whilst the rest of us crash and burn.
And now I think about it
not the first time he's dropped me in it.

*(GARY, STAN, BILL, TOM look over to TED. TED waves
back lamely)*

STAN It's true. Resolutely single.
The stories about him unbelievable.

BILL I hear he has unlimited beer on tap
and when he gets tired, can just take a nap.

TOM Every sports channel, and what's more
his feet rest on coffee tables and side tables - never the floor.

BILL And I know for a fact he has a huge shed.
Properly fitted out, you know, power and heated
with scale models of trains and stacks
of rolling stock and buildings and two miles of track.

TOM If only he could dance.
Some say it's a problem with balance
while others say
he was born that way.

TED *(to no-one in particular, doing the 'Ted dance')*
Gary said I must do my best to mingle
but apparently, no-one here is single.
That woman there, thought I had a shout.
Seconds later, wheeling absent boyfriends out.
Sod all chance
of any romance.
I might cut my losses and go home.
Open that new train set on my own.

STAN So, he dumped you in it, has no problems, and two miles of track.
How are you going to get him back?

TOM Perhaps you could run him over.

BILL Set fire to his house or date his mother.

GARY Yes, yes, funny. Enough, enough.
I know all about you three and your playground stuff.
I'll get you back! I'll get you back too!
I see this as an opportunity for you
to see what a better, more evolved man might say or do.
So much more civilised, advanced.
Watch and learn while you have the chance.

(GARY'S phone bleeps. GARY, STAN, TOM, BILL look at the phone together)

GARY Wait. What is this? A text from Annabelle.
I have to meet her parents. *(pause)* Stay the weekend as well.
Her nieces will be there *(pause)* and her aunt and uncle.
She has also arranged counselling
so we can discuss our relationship and deeper feelings.

(GARY, STAN, TOM, BILL look over to TED in sync)

TED There is Gary.
It was good of him to invite me
despite that little mishap a few days ago.
What a great friend. I don't know
how he's one of my acquaintances
Stout character. A guy to have with you in the trenches.

(TED puts his thumb up to GARY. GARY, STAN, BILL, TOM reciprocate)

GARY So, it is agreed then. *(still with thumb up, smiling)*
I will do the worst thing that you can
to an otherwise well-adjusted, single man.
I will introduce him to a woman.

TOM Well, that sounds like fun
but easier said than done.
Have you seen his clothes?
You've got no chance with those.

BILL No, he needs a new suit. Haircut. A good fettle.
And if such things are possible, gee him up a little.

GARY Agreed. But the chance of any real improvement is slim.
We need to alter the circumstances to fit around him.
One of my costume parties - would keep his bizarre dress sense concealed
and provide a level playing field.

(GARY, STAN, TOM, BILL do high fives)

STAN But where to find a woman who is suitable?
One to grind him down. Give him nothing but trouble.

TOM I can be of help. Your sister Mary is quite the matchmaker.
She has set me up twice. Each time a disaster.
The first date went badly.
The second, worse. She moved in with me
despite the fact I never asked her.
I think she followed me home. Found a key. As I say. Disaster.

GARY You're right. She has the weirdest set of friends.
I will phone her. But first to bait the trap. Make sure he attends.

(GARY walks over to TED)

GARY *(looking up)* I hope the universe understands
I am just giving karma a helping hand.

TED Gary!

GARY Ted!
Have I got some good news for you.
I know a woman who
is just your type. And it's been suggested
she would be interested
in meeting someone just like you.
Who knew!
She's coming to a party I'm arranging.
A blind date, perhaps? That's what I'm thinking.

TED Oh Gary, I don't know.
I already have so many women in tow.

GARY Ted. My much beloved uncle Harry, some twenty years dead,
has seen more action lately than your bed.

TED A fair point. And well said. (*TED thinks briefly then nods avidly*)

GARY Good. She's looking for someone charming, witty, sophisticated.

TED Oh lord! Forget them. Use me instead.

GARY I'm meaning you, you dunderhead!

TED But I am none of those things. (*stands with hands on hips*) I am Ted.

GARY Well, sadly, yes you are
but think of this, rather, as a war.
To keep the enemy confused
you need a little subterfuge.
And on that point, it's a costume party I'm arranging.
The usual. Drink, music, lots of flirting.
So you can wear armour, spacesuit, pirate costume, doublet, hose,
anything but those. (*points to TED'S clothes*)
So, are you on?

TED I am on.

GARY Good man.
It's a plan.
No more idle conversation
I'll go and put the wheels in motion.

*(GARY walks away leaving TED alone. TED moves
downstage, then suddenly outstretches his arms towards
audience)*

TED I know! This is a quite surprising day.
The world turned on its head – a meeting fixed.
A part of life which I've let slip away.
How easily things pass and are not missed.
When young, the time weighs heavy on our hands.

TED (ctd) An hour lasts forever; days are long.
But older, wiser, cannot understand
the stealth with which age comes. The decades gone.
How did I reach the place that I am now?
That clash of fate and youthful *joie de vivre*
played out, to lay the path that I tread now.
How much of it pre-set? How much was me?
I am forever cursed by looking back.
The need to tease apart and to dissect
the choices that I've made, the things I've lacked,
no part of which can ever be reset.
A pointless exercise if truth be told.
It is the things not done we most regret.
Perhaps, an early sign of growing old
to root among a past I should forget.
In fact, the common theme always the same.
A tale of letting people, places, go.
That heady mix of youth and guilt and blame
a cliché, yet the only line we know.
And then the thought that cannot be absolved.
A greater life which may have walked away
which no insight or logic can resolve
or keep a sense of losing out at bay.
A twist of fate we try to tell the self.
Of course, it's down to us and no-one else.
Our lives still filled with opportunity.
The present is a better place to be.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

SCENE 3

ALICE'S flat. MARY and ALICE are sat at a table stage left. MARY is resting on her elbow listening to ALICE.

MARY (*wearily*) Yes, yes, Alice, he was the worst. I don't know how you put up with him.

ALICE (*stridently*) Not only that Mary, he would disappear down the gym and I wouldn't see him until hours later.
He'd come back exhausted, sweaty – he'd been seeing my yoga instructor!
And birthdays!
Well, what can you say?
Not one present. Not a card. Not even an acknowledgement.

MARY (*deadpan*) You are right. He was a fool: you were a saint.

ALICE And his manners, his sweaty feet,
why is it men come so incomplete?
Free of even the slightest ability
to commit events or dates to memory.
I don't ask for much: no, instead,
one who can see a tea cosy and not put it on his head.
And basic hygiene! Hygiene!
Do none own a sink or a washing machine?
Why I dated such an idiot, I'll never know.

MARY Yes, yes, I agree with you. (*louder, slower*) But that was seven years ago!
Most people cry a little, then move on.
They don't keep rattling about it for this long.

ALICE Truth to tell,
I'm in a little bit of a dry spell.

MARY Alice, you are not in a dry spell you are in a desert.
Look, dating is a dangerous game. It is messy. You can get hurt.
How many boyfriends since you let this idiot go?

ALICE I don't keep count of these things. I don't know.

(MARY looks at her, ALICE shakes her head)

MARY What, what are you trying to tell me now? He was your last fling?

(ALICE getting increasingly annoyed)

MARY Oh you poor thing.
There are tests and treatments now and everything.

ALICE Excuse me, excuse me, I don't need tests.
I have always looked after my own best interests
and when things happen
well then, they happen.
And if they don't
then they don't.
I am waiting for the right man, the time, the place.

MARY The right man, the time, the place?
You're not even in the race!
These things don't happen spontaneously.
The trouble with you is you're far too picky
and that temper of yours is a disgrace.
It has always got you into scrapes.

ALICE No, I do not have any trouble
with my temper. I am entirely calm and amiable.

MARY Really? We all remember when Jason asked you out.
You gave him such a clout.

ALICE I did not. Well, I may have done. I thought he was creepy.
He just stood there winking at me.

MARY Alice, and not a word of a lie,
you are deluded. He has a tick in his eye.
Don't you remember the doctor agree
when we were stood over him in casualty?

(ALICE eventually nods shamefaced)

MARY Look. All that is history.
Listen to me.
I have a few contacts in the world of men.

MARY (ctd) Let me fix you up. Start to date again.
It will all be done with sensitivity.
Tell me
what sort of man would you like to see?

ALICE Well, tall, handsome, dresses well but casually.
Perhaps into shopping, or cookery.
Muscular but not too showy.
Likes to go to plays and such.
Loves his mother, but not too much.
A kind, intelligent, perhaps rich, romantic lover.

MARY (*exasperated*) Well in that case you could wait forever.
Look in my experience, you can pick one of those, at most two,
and two's pushing it. But I'll see what I can do.

(GARY and TED enter stage right. GARY makes TED sit on a chair and is pacing around him. GARY puts his mobile to his ear. MARY's mobile rings. MARY walks centre stage to speak to GARY on the mobile. GARY is gesticulating wildly, clearly describing TED to MARY. The phone call finishes and MARY walks back to ALICE who is sat at the table).

MARY (*triumphally*) It is fate! It is destiny!
It is meant to be!
That was my brother Gary. Of all the coincidences!
Right here, right now, he has a friend in the same circumstances.
And listen to this, in a further twist
he apparently has all the qualities on your list!
Lucky you!
He assures me that its true.

(*MARY and ALICE look happy, smiling*)

MARY Alice, leave it with me. He is arranging a party.
I will get all the details and text them to you presently.
(*walking away*) How good am I. A flawless plan.
The perfect man (*glances back at ALICE*) for the almost perfect woman.

(*MARY exits leaving ALICE alone*)

ALICE Although I have not mentioned it,
I have not decided to go as yet.
(*pause*)
Perhaps she knows me better than I know
there is a certain truth to her ranting.
You think you have life's measure then it goes.
The job of living so confuses things.
Our landscape shifts and alters everyday
as players change their roles within the game.
The constant rule is change but as she says
I linger on the edge and stay the same.
But oh, those awful dates, the stop and start,
how life hangs on a call or thoughtless word.
Those parts of us we hide and keep apart,
the gap from what is said to what is heard.
I think that age has passed, that time has gone.
Those years of strife consigned to history.
Why try again and let the mess go on?
Another dose of that is not for me.
And yet..... (*pause*)
there is a strange mathematics that applies.
Our need to share the things we do and say.
For sharing somehow seems to multiply
the weight and meaning that we take away.
And though the novelty is quickly gone,
they hear our every gripe, we hear them moan,
that discourse serves to spark and drive us on
to places we might never reach alone.
(*pause*)
But then I know the baggage I still keep.
The fairy tales we read, the lies we're fed.
The kiss that wakes the princess from her sleep.
The handsome prince that rattles round my head.
Those sugar-coated pills – they are not true.
My trashy books are not reality.
I know about the carnage that ensues
when life dissects each lie, relentlessly.
A safer world when you do not engage
with others who might only let you down.
Secure as that may be, it is a cage,
no less because we build it on our own.
And when in jail, our judgement is suspect.

ALICE (ctd) We lose our sense, and scramble to break free.
Then rush a choice, which later we regret.
Another dose of that is not for me.
And yet.... (*pause*)
this is a chance to put all that aside,
and in that choice, return the reins to me.
To cut this burden loose and to decide
to trust myself, and act accordingly.
I linger on the things that I've let go
so carelessly, without a single thought.
It is our curse that we can never know
which choices will return and which will not.
Then drunk with life we waste our precious youth.
The well so deep, or that is what we think.
And later, we are shocked to hear the truth.
The well is dry, yet we still want to drink.
So there it is! To stop still, or to go?
To let the gods of romance deal the cards?
Or stay right where I am, with what I know?
There are no easy paths. The choice is hard.
(*long pause, seen to be thinking*)
Oh, sod it all, I need a little fun!
I rattle 'round a life too big for one!

(*END OF SCENE*)

ACT I

SCENE 4

JOHN'S office. There is a desk and bookcase stage right, and the table stage left. JOHN is sat on the desk and ROBB is walking about.

JOHN So Robb, what's the agenda today?
Anything that needs to be sorted straight away?

ROBB There's word that a pair called the Smith brothers are running around bad mouthing you about town. Saying as you could be going to prison people should look to them for protection. I think they're trying to carve out a patch by the station free of any of our control or supervision.

JOHN This was bound to happen. Bit-players muscling in. The longer my case goes on, the stronger any speculation. Well, I have no intention of going to prison though at the moment, it doesn't look good. But its bad timing from them. They should have waited. Robb, we need to do some contingency planning but right now, we have to rein things in. We need to very publicly let everyone know who is still king of this particular castle and the Smith brothers have just volunteered to be that example. Send the boys around to track them down. Bring them in for a little chat.

ROBB I have already tried that. The boys looked everywhere. They had vanished. No-one knows where. I asked a few people about them. Intelligent. Not the usual louts. Never rush in mob handed but always plan things out. Sounds like they have already factored in this scenario and sorted themselves somewhere safe to go.

JOHN Okay, understood. I will deal with this personally. Robb, press our contacts, refresh a memory

JOHN (ctd) or two.

Once we have a location, a visit. Me and you.

ROBB Will do. (*exits*)

JOHN I am a most peculiar man.

I know exactly what I am.

Some say I am not flesh and blood
and if they do say that, well, good.

My reputation is hard earned.

Over long years I have learned

the threat of a thing

is often more potent than the event actually happening.

The mind is its own trap.

When tensed properly, the spring will snap

and all resistance fade away.

My standing, status, paves the way

to take what I want without further unpleasantness or brutality.

You can't imagine the trouble that saves me.

So when people set out to undermine

that very thing, my name and position, it is the worst crime

they can commit. One I can never ignore.

It will damage, nay destroy, all I have worked for.

ROBB (*enters*) News waiting for me. They've been seen drinking recently
in an old pub in the city.

JOHN Good, let's pay it a visit.

ROBB I'll go and pack the kit.

*(ROBB goes over to the table stage left and pulls a sack
and a box out from under the table. Puts objects from the
box inside the sack)*

ROBB (*shouts to JOHN*) Did you get the text from Alice about the party and the bloke?

JOHN (*shouts to ROBB*) Yes, we spoke.

(to audience) It is my single weakness and virtue, family.

The only thing which means anything to me.

My sister Alice is my one good part.

She is so warm hearted,

JOHN (ctd) good and innocent you see,
she cannot see the darkness and violence in me.
She gives to me qualities
all of which are hers, not mine.
Alice has recently been on my mind.
It would make the strangest study.
How two people from the same home, environment, family,
could turn out quite so differently.
What quirk of fate
could so differentiate
two moods, two characters, two sets of emotions?
What is the arbiter of those rations?
But how this cold heart has served me.
I attain my goals implacably
so I will not curse the hand I have been dealt.
Nor have I ever felt
jealousy at receiving the meanest part of this bargain.
No, when called to final account, then, then
I will say, my virtues? Alice. Alice was that part of me
and who knows, that may be enough to save me.
But I am not naïve. I know the path I walk is limited.
Whether prison or death Alice and I will be parted.
Ultimately, she to heaven, and I to hell
but not before I have seen her settled, safe, and well.

*(ROBB comes over to JOHN carrying the loaded sack over
his shoulder)*

ROBB John, it's a bit late now I know,
but we really should keep this packed and ready to go.

JOHN Robb, a little amendment
to this evening's entertainment.
This party where Alice is meeting her blind date.
I think this guy and I should have a little *tete-a-tete*.
We'll call there first. I have no doubt he is some chancer
who thinks he is god's answer
to single women. I may need to clip his wings
or clip other more tangible things.
After that is done, we will go Smith hunting.
Have we ever seen this pair? What do they look like? Do we know?

ROBB Yes and no.
We've never met them, but they've been in the local paper.
It's a smudged photo. We can't get a decent copy until later.

JOHN Sloppy, allowing themselves to be photographed. No problem though.
We'll introduce ourselves before the final blow. (*JOHN exits*)

ROBB I don't know who I would least like to be.
The Smith brothers, most obviously,
but I pity the poor sod who Alice is seeing
with no idea of the trouble that's coming. (*exits*)

(*END OF SCENE*)

ACT 1

SCENE 5

Musical interlude.

A costume party. *GARY and MARY are stood stage right. Everyone is dressed in costumes but all are quite reserved. TED is stood alone upstage left, 'Ted dancing'. He is wearing a full-length coat down to his feet so his costume underneath can't be seen.*

GARY Look at all this. So am I, or am I not, a star?

MARY Well I wouldn't go that far.
Look, let's cut all this nonsense short,
what about the man you brought?

GARY Well, who's the organised one now? He is already here!

MARY Really, where? (*MARY scans around*)
Oh, is that your friend, what's-his-name, Ted, over there?
NO! NO! Tell me it's not true.
You would not do, you could not do,
THIS to me.

GARY Hang on. Hang on. Ted is quite a trophy.
He is relatively sane and is still fancy free.
Comes with Gary warranty!

(in the background, JOHN has entered and is talking to TED quite animatedly. At one point, TED opens his coat to let JOHN see his costume)

MARY So this is the winner you described to me!
The tall, dark, sophisticated, talented, yet complex loner!
I saw this gem in town last week dressed as a Bay-City Roller.
It took years to get Mary here. The time. The trouble.
And who do you bring along? Barney Rubble!

GARY Well at least I didn't bring Bo Peep. (*pause*) Bo Peep!

MARY (*looking puzzled*) Are you going mad? Bo Peep?

(MARY looks over shoulder and is startled. ALICE has entered and come up behind her dressed as Bo Peep complete with crook. She is wearing a skirt of large volume with multiple underskirts. MARY pushes ALICE a short distance away from GARY to speak with her)

MARY A costume party. It is a free pass.
You can wear anything however crass.
You know, something slinky, risky,
designer and yet slutty.
Something to perhaps show off the body.
The whole point of this
is that you weave a mist
over his eyes so he will be utterly distracted.
It is a fact. Men and sense are that easily parted.
How simple should that be? But oh no.
You could have the build of a docker under that. No-one would know.

ALICE Excuse me. Excuse me.
I am not about to start dressing provocatively
for anybody. I choose to dress quite modestly.
Besides, I am not made of money.
This was in the back of the shop on sale going cheap.

GARY Did you say going sheep?

MARY Really? Really? Very helpful. Try to keep your comments to yourself.
(nodding in TED'S direction) You have no scope to heckle anybody else.

(MARY moves ALICE upstage right, out of GARY'S earshot)

MARY Your date is over there.
Do not move: and do not stare.

(MARY leaves ALICE and returns to GARY)

MARY Well, what does he do?

GARY An accountant.

MARY Alice is an accountant too.
What else does he do?

GARY He writes stories for a local fanzine.

MARY She writes a column for a specialist magazine.
She's nuts on old films.

GARY Just like him!

MARY Strange as they both are, you have to admit
they seem to be a reasonable fit.

*(JOHN has finished talking with TED and moves over to
talk with ALICE)*

GARY *(pointing at JOHN)* Wait. Why is that guy going over?
They are hugging now. He's not her boyfriend, is he? Lover?

MARY No, no. Don't be silly. That's Alice's brother.

GARY Her brother. Seriously? That's not fine.
That guy is trouble. Like, serious crime.
Honestly. Get on the wrong side of him
you need to book a plot and choose the hymn.

MARY No, no, that can't be. She speaks so fondly of him.
Gary, what have you got us into? Are you sure?
Is this another mess like before?

GARY Me? Me? You bring me the sister
of the local Jack the ripper.
I heard he is also insanely protective of her.
His nickname is the butcher.
What have I got Ted into?
What do we do?
He'll end up buried in cement
or dug under an allotment.
Incidentally, as will we.
He's not the type to forget or forgive easily.
Really, we don't want any part of this,
we have to get Ted out of this.

MARY Calm down. Calm down.
We simply need to turn this thing around.
Alice is here and she's already seen Ted
so we let the meeting go ahead
but make sure they break up before anything serious starts.
So they meet amicably, then later part.
A few well-chosen words to load the dice
and tip the scales. A little skewed advice.
So they have a meeting, as people do; talk, socialise, then go.
Hence, the apparently crazed, psychopathic murderer will never know.
Remember, this must all seem like nothing
so do not over-egg the pudding.
This is all routine. A happy, but ill-fated venture.
Nothing to see here or anywhere. Just an awkward encounter.
I will make this up to Alice in some way later.

GARY Right, let's get this thing done. We're on!
Stick to the plan. What can possibly go wrong?

(GARY walks to TED downstage left and MARY walks to ALICE downstage right. All are stood on the edge of the stage. TED takes off his long coat revealing a medieval style costume with puffed sleeves, and what can only be described as an enormous codpiece which GARY notices immediately)

GARY Oh, my lord, what is that?
Where is your mack?
For pities sake, please put it back.

TED What is the matter with you?
You said it's what I had to do.
Costume required which is what this is.
Elegant, with a medieval twist.

(GARY is silent staring at the huge codpiece)

TED Oh that! The only one left.
Difficult to believe but its off the shelf.
Believe me, this jacket
has not a single pocket in it.
Luckily, it more than covers my crotch, and is also big enough
to store my car keys and loose change and stuff.

(the codpiece starts to flash and makes a ringing noise)

GARY I pray to god that that's your phone.

(TED starts to fumble to get telephone)

GARY No. No. Let it ring out. Leave well-enough alone.

(TED is facing audience, head slightly back enhancing his profile, with head looking over his right shoulder at ALICE. Immensely pleased with himself. Almost preening)

TED Look. I think that she has noticed me.

GARY That you think at all is news to me.

TED Look how she follows me with her eyes.

GARY Again, no surprise.
The whole room is tracking you.
Satellites in space have left orbit to get a better view.

MARY Alice will you stop staring!
You are so embarrassing.

ALICE I am trying to keep my eyes wandering around
but they keep looking down.
Like a black hole with a captured planet,
I just keep circling it.
And when I think that I am winning
a terrible gravity drags my eyes back in.
I have considered this carefully, and have no doubt,
I would be grateful if you could poke them out.

MARY Well, I don't know what the fuss is about.
You make too many assumptions about size and fit.
I have a triple garage but there is just a mini in it.

TED Look, she is definitely curious.
What are you waiting for? Introduce us.

(GARY moves to downstage centre to meet and speak with MARY out of earshot of ALICE and TED)

GARY As you can plainly see
the idiot needs no help from you or me.
Nonetheless,
our health and wellbeing depend on this.

MARY Any hints
to work with or sensitive points?

GARY Well, once he nearly drown so has a morbid fear of the sea.
As you know, dresses very retro, very conservatively.
Oh, when you speak too slow – he can't wait. Interrupts you constantly.

(MARY returns to ALICE)

MARY A few points to the wise. He is a deep-sea diver
and loves the water.
Likes to plumb the depths.
But all the pressure has left him a little deaf.
You need to speak slowly, perhaps make signs as well.
Repeat everything. That will help. Likes women who dress outrageously as well.

(MARY returns to GARY)

GARY And you?
Anything I can use?

MARY She does not like to dress provocatively.
Oh, guards her personal space quite ferociously.

(GARY returns to TED)

GARY A few points to the wise. She is a lingerie model.
Nighties and lace frillies – strictly commercial.
Absolutely all above board.
Catalogue stuff. Nothing sleezy or untoward.
But as you can imagine she gets ribbed a lot.
It's a sensitive spot.
Perhaps you could be very supporting
of her general lack of coverage and usual skimpy clothing.

(GARY sees JOHN pass closely by and visibly panics)

TED Also, she likes to be..... patted on the head.
(*GARY pats TED on the head*)
Her mother used to train dogs, but they died.....so she trained her instead.

*(MARY, ALICE, TED, GARY move downstage centre.
ALICE and TED face each other with MARY and GARY
flanking behind. Throughout their conversation, ALICE
and TED look back to their respective mentors reacting
and looking for reassurance)*

ALICE *(to TED, slow)*
Do you like going down. Going down? *(both index fingers point
vaguely down herself)*
Have a good look at what's around. What's around?
Obviously, I have never been down there. It is a regret.
I imagine that it gets pretty wet. Pretty wet.
Do you ever use a bell. Use a bell?
Perhaps wear a rubber suit as well?
Do you go all the way to the bottom as well?

TED *(to GARY)* My stars, she doesn't mess about.
Is this the way now? Let it all out?
There are so many things about women I do not know.
This one seems to be her own echo.

ALICE *(to MARY)* To say he is so heard of hearing
he does a lot of whispering.

TED *(to ALICE)* I like your costume.
I am very impressed with its.... volume.

ALICE Oh, this old thing. I tend to dress a bit flamboyantly.
I wear this when I'm in town quite regularly.

TED *(eagerly, to ALICE)*
I like to look at pictures of women with little on.
I think it is art. There is nothing wrong.
The human body is beautiful. I have some pictures on my wall
of women with barely anything on at all.
I think that lingerie models are unfairly presented.
They are clearly very talented.

ALICE *(to MARY)* Why is he telling me this?

MARY At least the guy is honest.

TED (to ALICE) I know that we have just met,
so it's a little early yet,
but if you have any photographs on you,
however skimpy, I would be pleased to look them through.

ALICE (to MARY) Not only is he dressed like a spare
now he is perverting on my underwear.
He is taking the piss. I know he is.
He should watch out. I won't take much more of this.

TED (to ALICE) Perhaps there are some pictures that you could send.
I know people in publishing and can share them with my friends.

GARY (to TED) Look, the light of love is in her eyes.

TED (to GARY) Are you sure? That's some disguise.

(Gary nudges him forward. He reaches out and slowly pats ALICE on the head four times then draws back. ALICE visibly tenses and leans further forward. GARY nudges TED forward again)

TED (to GARY) What, more?
Are you sure? She's looking angrier than before.

(TED pats ALICE on the head again. ALICE stands and seems to calm herself. ALICE reaches back to take the crook from MARY who has been holding it. MARY is reluctant to let it go but ALICE stares at her. Eventually, MARY tilts the crook towards ALICE who grabs it. ALICE screams and TED screams in response. ALICE chases TED swinging the crook, eventually they run offstage)

MARY A pat on the head? Really? A pat on the head?
Consider the pudding well and truly egged.

GARY I almost had it
but then I panicked.
Still, we are in the clear.

(JOHN and ROBB enter after ALICE has chased TED off stage and they do not see any of their meeting or subsequent chase. JOHN comes up stealthily behind MARY and GARY and puts his arms around their shoulders but visibly too tightly for comfort. Keeps shushing them when they try to speak)

JOHN Well, what do we have here?
I don't think we have ever met
but let me make plain from the outset
that I know all about you two.
This matchmaking thing you do.
No. You need not say anything.
I make it my business to know such things.
You may or may not be aware
that Alice is under my personal care
and I take that role seriously.
I have quizzed your guy Ted quite precisely.
I form an opinion instantly.
I am a good judge of character
although, myself, not of good character.
We spoke about a range of things
and I see no part of me in him.
I would not call him innocent
but he has no edge: no bad intent.
Do you know of the reputation
which proceeds me for destruction?
Well, I came here tooled up expecting trouble
(pause) but I think they would make an ideal couple.

(JOHN walks around to front. MARY and GARY look astonished)

JOHN Shortly, I may be dining with her majesty.
That is, I may be living in captivity
for quite a while. This guy of yours needs longevity.
As soon as we spoke, I knew
there was unlikely to be a queue
of other women to turn his head.
He would stick with Alice, instead.
I am known for being dour, serious,
but the codpiece is hilarious.

JOHN (ctd) I am running out of time.
and this is a great weight off my mind.
Alice can be stroppy, perhaps you knew.
So I'm leaving this with you.
I'm charging you with pushing this through.
Better the devil you know.
Get them together. So before I go
just to say, do not disappoint me.
Need I say this less politely?
Good. I must leave for other business
which will not be completed with such finesse.
Robb! Have you got the stuff?

ROBB Yes, time is passing. Let's get off.

(JOHN and ROBB exit, not looking back. MARY and GARY look shellshocked)

GARY Well, I didn't see that coming. Did you?

MARY Not a clue.
Not at all.

GARY Fate has once again kicked me in the balls.

(party fades, lights dim, people start clearing things, to indicate time passing. MARY and GARY sit on a table stage right swinging their legs. There is the sound of the chase continuing between ALICE and TED offstage)

GARY A south facing plot. Onward Christian Soldiers is he way to go.
Flowers in a vase or tied with a bow?

MARY Oh shut up. We are already in too deep yet need to go deeper.
Now we have to get them back together.
They are both single and fancy free.
How hard can that be?

(ALICE brandishing the crook runs past still chasing TED. They run offstage)

GARY Quick - take a look!
Is that blood on the pointy bit of her crook?

MARY No. I don't think so. Can we bribe him? Is it likely?

GARY No. I really don't have that much money.
Besides, I can't throw Ted under the bus.

MARY Oh, don't be such a wuss.
This is only for a few days
until they lock the psychopath away.
Though she does have quite a vicious streak
which even for a woman, is quite unique.

GARY I suppose not all is lost. They are talking
in the periods when they are resting.
Look. Do you see? (*points to a place offstage*)
You might even say quite affectionately.
Albeit it is while they get their breath back
in the lull before a fresh attack.
How long has it been? Half an hour? After?
Another matched trait: they both have stamina. (*high fives*)

MARY And before this insane plan was hatched
they were already pretty well matched.

GARY To turn this around, I will need to get my mates together
I'll ring them later.

MARY Do you fancy dinner?
We'll formulate a plan tomorrow. I'll pay.

GARY (*exiting*) This has been a very, very strange day.

(*END OF ACT I*)

ACT II

ACT II

SCENE 1

Musical interlude.

TED'S flat. It has a sofa and visible door. The doorbell rings and TED answers. STAN, BILL, and TOM enter generally bouncing around laddishly, fist pumping, pointing at TED, punching his shoulder.

STAN You dog you!
And we thought we knew you.

TED Who me.....

BILL And so modest too!

TOM The tower of power.
The man of the hour.

BILL The guy with the plan.
What a man!

TED I think the beer was too strong
or you've been in the sun too long.

STAN Ted. Tell us how you charmed her.
We're keen to learn from the master.

TED This is insanity.
Are you sure you mean me?
Really, no more.
Leave me alone, there is the door.

TOM Excuse me. A woman you barely knew
and five minutes later she's chasing you.

TED Well, technically that's true.

TOM Listen here, listen here. And no less shabby,
couldn't wait to get her hands on his body.

TED Well.....

STAN Intrigued and beguiled her, then, am I not correct,
ran off playing hard to get?

TED Well technically yes... but none of that is entirely true.

BILL True, true?
Truth depends on your point of view.

(TED starts sniffing)

STAN What are you doing?
Sniffing?

TED I am checking for fumes.
Carbon monoxide in the room.
For clearly, this is an hallucination
and you are a figment of my imagination.

BILL Ted.
Can you argue with a word we've said?

TED No, honestly,
she genuinely wanted to kill me.

STAN Aha! Great emotion. Doesn't matter which.
Nature is weird. Sometimes flicks a switch
and suddenly pent-up aggression
becomes overwhelming, breathless, senseless passion.

TOM Besides which, let me tell you, dating - your reputation
once the subject of considerable ridicule and derision,
without being too overblown or theatrical,
is now bordering on the mythical.

*(STAN, BILL, TOM look up at some imaginary far-off
point)*

TED It is? Really, really?
No, you are fooling me.
This cannot be.

BILL Yes. Yes. It's the truth.
Gone through the roof.

TED Well then, its falsely inflated
but perhaps I could live without it being corrected.

(doorbell rings)

STAN I wonder who that could be?

*(STAN, BILL and TOM are on one knee, arms outstretched
theatrically)*

STAN, BILL, TOM (together) Look it's Gary!

GARY *(anti-climax, rather timidly)* Surprise!

TED You! I can't believe my eyes.
You nearly got me killed.

GARY She was, maybe, a tad strong willed.
But was she not spicy
and not a little feisty?
I mentioned all of this, did I not?

TED No you did not.

GARY Perhaps I forgot.

TED You specifically did not mention
her surly disposition
or her psychopathic inclination.

GARY Let us not dwell on mere detail.

TED Detail? Detail?
She ran after me, and repeatedly took large swings
with an extremely heavy, long pointy thing.

GARY Ah..... love taps!

TED Love taps? Love taps?

STAN, BILL, TOM (together) Love taps. *(all three nod sagely)*

BILL So long out of dating!
It's the newest thing.

GARY It is the modern way.
The courtship of the day.
You express strong, deep-felt emotion
with a vigorous scything motion.

TED You are quite mad. All of you. She is vicious.
I think at one point I lost consciousness.

GARY Look, and I can tell,
I think that you did rather well.
Shall we? *(pointing to sofa)*

TED I'd hate to see if things went badly.
Gary, she frightens me.

GARY Ah, true love you see. *(sitting on sofa)*
One point. For some unknown reason
I may have mixed up her occupation.
She is not a lingerie model at all. Something quite different. What a silly error.
Something we can laugh about together.

TED Thanks for letting me know. Oh. The things I said.
Do you think any could have been misinterpreted?

(GARY shrugs, then long pause)

TED ...pictures on my wall
...with barely anything on at all
...snaps of you
...skippy photographs...publish them...look them through

(TED curls over into a ball, groaning loudly)

GARY *(to himself)* My dear, dear simple friend.
He got there in the end.
(to TED) So, just for you, I'm arranging another party.
Alice will be there. I can see that you're excited already.

TED (*still groaning, in foetal position*) Oh, leave me alone
I am safer here at home.

GARY None of that. I can see that you're primed and ready to go again
but this time without the blows or pain.
I promise you. No costumes or lethal partyware,
it will be an altogether more civilised affair.
The lack of costume should disarm her
but if you remember last time, I did mention armour.

TED Just let me think it through.
and I'll get back to you.
Gary, setting up a party, it must be a struggle.
It's really good of you to offer – to go to all this trouble.
You are such a good friend, honestly.

GARY Let me tell you Ted. Getting you and Alice together means life or death to me.

*(TED pats fist on his heart; GARY and STAN exit; BILL
and TOM linger behind)*

BILL Can we come later and play with your train set?

TED Great. You haven't seen all of it yet.
It got too big for the shed. It's into the kitchen extension.
Ten engines now and seven stations.
Bill. Are you crying?

BILL It's just the thought of giving it all up, you know, losing....

TOM Steady, steady.

(TOM puts his arm around BILL'S shoulder)

TOM You may have said too much already.

(TOM and BILL exit).

TED There is a certain magic I fear
when people speak the words we want to hear.
They are more substantial than normal – more thought through
and damn it all, we know they're true.

TED (ctd) What woman would not want this? (*looks at audience*)

Cupid draws his bow and cannot miss.

I realise all along

that women were not wrong

to completely reject me, but were simply stringing me along

merely wanting to extend the chase,

not wanting to lose face

for being seen

to appear too keen.

So my almost total humiliation and rejection, a pretence

which suddenly makes perfect sense!

(*pause*)

Shameless flattery and false adulation

builds a palace without any foundations

made of crumbling brick and rotted wood.

But who would not live there if they could?

(*pause*)

Still, back now to reality.

At least I have options in front of me.

What if I did go, and this is all fantasy,

but, say, we did get on, and suddenly

she was my girlfriend, wife, what would the issues, the cost, be?

What do other people do?

I really need to think this through.

(*TED moves downstage left to look directly into audience*)

TED She has a temper;

Can I outpace her?

Will things go well?

What is the thing she has with bells?

(*bell ringing motion, shrugs at audience*)

Will I be happy?

Will she be happy?

FIRST VOICE FROM CROWD

When me and my wife argue, I just stand.

We talk it through, then it can't get out of hand.

Stay in the ring like me and trust to luck.

TED Ah yes, but does your wife own a crook?

I have to get some distance in, you see.

It increases her reach quite considerably.

SECOND VOICE FROM CROWD

Lay down the law. Stand up and be a man.
Bluntness the best policy; be forthright, the best plan.

TED Well thanks for that and I wish you no ill
but that advice could get me killed.
I want to die in my bed.
Natural causes, obviously. Not with dints about my head.

THIRD VOICE FROM CROWD

Ply her with chocolates very day.
Flowers on special occasions. Book a holiday.
Make her breakfast. Go to a plush hotel
and surprise her with a spa day. Perfume as well.
Ring every evening when you are away
and be entirely honest to her in every single way.

TED I see where you're going with that. Quite radical.
As a man, first thoughts, it doesn't seem that practical.
I need to look into it some more
but I don't think that's been tried before.
(*TED moves centre stage*)
Enough, enough.....
I need to stop talking,
Sit down and consider things
(pause)
Alone, when I have time, I sit and think.
The mind can run so many different ways.
Our memories the pool from which we drink.
They quell our thirst on dryer, windswept days.
And good or bad, the taste always the same.
They let us know the place that we've come from.
And whether they bring joy or give us pain
no less a part of what we have become.
When younger, less intense than I am now,
I did not see the merit in such things.
But older, I can see what they endow.
The value that those solid footings bring.
It is a strange affair, remembering.
We think we know the things that we have seen.
More seasoned eyes, the insight that they bring,

TED (ctd) can pick that view apart and change the scene.

And even in the scraps that we collect
the detail is less sharp each passing year.
We search our thoughts for names and dates and yet
emotion nested there is still quite clear.
Those feelings and the stories that they tell,
the trophies, prizes, that we stash away,
although well-worn are more than capable
to shift our mood, return us to that day.
In this, I know, I have been very lax
not putting things aside for later times.
We tend to waste our days and to relax,
forget the goals we wanted for our lives.
I do not want the years to walk straight by.
Each moment passed; another moment lost.
A path that we could take yet failed to try.
and who can know our loss or guess its cost.
We sleepwalk through a life and loose our way
then look behind and wonder where time went.
A wake-up call perhaps, to seize the day.
To leave no waking hour left unspent.
(takes out a mobile phone)
Gary. Hi it's Ted.
Yes. Let's go ahead.
(to audience)
There are no guarantees in this strange game.
We do not deal the cards or write the rules.
We know all this but grumble just the same
if life does not supply the hand we choose.
Who has not felt a little jealousy?
We grasp for things beyond our reach or call
and in that hapless state then cannot see
the greatest gift, to play the game at all. *(exits)*

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

SCENE 2

ALICE'S flat. She is preparing a bottle of wine downstage right. ANNABELLE, BARBARA, JUNE, BERTHA, are sat at the table stage right talking with each other. ALICE eventually holds a bottle in one hand and four glasses between her fingers in the other hand.

ALICE (to audience) Mary has been calling me all morning.
Wants to arrange another meeting
between Ted and me. No idea what to do.
I need another point of view.
The gang are in the room.
My 'brains trust' fully briefed and ready. (*looks over*) I may be doomed.
Still, another bottle of merlot,
a deep breath, and off we go.

(*ALICE walks over to ANNABELLE, BARBARA, JUNE, BERTHA*)

ALICE Annabelle. I know things are up in the air with Gary
but have you anything to help me?

ANNABELLE Well, things are better at the moment
but I sympathise with your predicament.
Basically, men are sent from hell
and their father is the devil.
I am not a violent person
but have had such provocation
that should I wish to injure Gary
the Dalai Lama himself offered to hold him down for me.

ALICE Thanks for sharing, but I meant
on clearing misunderstandings and arguments.

ANNABELLE Sorry, I may have overstated things.
We are attending couples counselling
and it's going swell.
Though they tell me its better if your partner comes as well.

ALICE And trust issues?
Are they old news?

ANNABELLE Of course, I've learned to trust again and let him off the leash. Please!
As far as I can trust a mouse to guard a piece of cheese.

ALICE Barbara. You've dated Matthew
all of three weeks now? Anything I can use?

BARBARA (*dreamily, lines flowing together*)

Well Matthew always says to me
true love is bound to end happily.
He's dreamy. And so romantic. Isn't that sweet?
He sends me lots of those little sayings by email and by tweet
and we never argue or fight
and late at night
he doesn't phone once but twice
and he won't put the phone down, which is nice,
but neither will I, so sometimes
we talk on and on and on and the time
just flies away, and before long there is sunlight at the windowpane
and it is morning, and then he comes to visit me again.

ALICE Oh, good lord. Throw me a bone here.
This is going nowhere.

BARBARA Well, Miss Grumpy. I am no less insightful
than Miss Bitterness over there. And I think men are delightful.

ALICE June, I beg of you
a more robust, balanced scientific view.

JUNE As you know, I am a scientist
and I have looked into this.
Examined the male brain carefully.
Every aspect, systematically.
It is all a matter of scope.
You need tweezers and a microscope.
If you could get me a slice
about this wide, that would suffice.

ALICE No, you muppet, not anatomy,
I'm talking about their psyche.

JUNE Well that is a slippery slide.
I'd run away and hide.
But that is not based on evidence,
just observation and common sense.

ALICE But if I got a basic man, say,
could he be trained up in any way?

JUNE Ah. Changing them for the better? I would like to give you hope.
Its every bit as easy as tanning snow or plating smoke.

ALICE Well I think the vote's roughly two to one.
Bertha. Degrees in logic and philosophy. What's to be done?

BERTHA Why wait so long to come here? For me
this is pure simplicity. (*flowing quickly, without pause*)
I suggest a table with scores to compare
the before and after of any choice, but we must be aware
that they must be weighted for priority
but in assigning absolute values or orders of magnitude the rationality
of your decisions must be in doubt, for example, you might THINK
you value something, but really, it is only what you THINK you THINK,
which is why I'm suggesting psychotherapy (*pause to take deep breath*)
to get to the nub of those buried issues, then fitted naturally
with branches of philosophy, say, starting with ethics and aesthetics
and then for the next few years working through the basics
at a suitable educational site to finally get to a position
(*slight pause for effect, then slower*)
where you can understand the further work needed, in reaching a decision.

ALICE Well thanks for that. That all sounds routine
and as much use as logic and philosophy has ever been.
(*shouts*) Now listen here, you brainless crew!
I will get sense from at least one of you.
Question: answer: focussed, relevant, short, and fast.
Value each breath carefully, for it may be your last.
Should I go or not?

ANNABELLE Yes and no - pretend not to go then stalk him within earshot.

BARBARA Oh no, you can't do that, you might get caught.

JUNE The evidence is equivocal: that's all I've got.

BERTHA What do you mean 'go', that could mean a lot of things. Wholeheartedly, grudgingly - what was the question – I've forgot?

ALICE Well girls that has been fun.
I suggest you might like to scatter now as I'm going for a gun.

ANNABELLE Oh Alice, you are such a shrew
and yes, we love you too.

(ALICE gets up to clear a tray and faces the audience away from the table)

ALICE My friends have gossip coming out their ears.
They seem to lead such interesting lives.
While I've had nothing hot to say for years
apart, of course, from shameless, bare faced lies.
So when I get a snippet such as this
I spread the word with some rapidity.
It's good to let them know I still exist.
At last, to have a scandal fixed on me.
Though scandal seems to be a little strong,
I may have tweaked the truth. Well, just a bit.
You wait and wait for things to come along
so when they do, you make the most of it.
But as I know, this cannot stay the pace.
Things hit the stands and then they fade away.
A better drama sure to take its place.
The fate of all, to flare and then decay.
But why should this make any call on me?
Why worry what another says or does?
To judge ourselves by what they choose to see,
what measure they apply, the sum of us?
We find what our friends want and then we start
to value and to crave that self-same prize.
The truth is we are doomed, at least in part,
to live our lives through other people's eyes.
But leaving any pretence to one side
we are quite simply made and crudely run.
Forget any deep thought. Throw that aside.
It's good to have our moment in the sun.

(ALICE walks to ANNABELLE, BARBARA, JUNE, BERTHA)

ALICE So ladies, getting ready to go?

BARBARA Yes. Is it my place next week? I thought so.

JUNE Tell us then. Are you going to the party?

ALICE I've got some thinking to do. We'll see.

BERTHA Well, let us know
when you know!

ALICE I will. I will.
What is the saying? Go away you make me ill.

(ANNABELLE puts one finger up, JUNE playfully hits her on shoulder as she is going. BERTHA, JUNE, ANNABELLE and BARBARA exit)

ALICE It is a help to talk our problems through,
to let our friends and colleagues have a say.
We carefully judge the worth of their review
then do the thing we wanted anyway.
But this is not to state that talk is wrong.
Without that honest push, we would be stuck.
We often know our own mind all along
but need to hear the words to back it up.
And in that vein, what is it I should do,
what is the best that I can hope for here?
To rush ahead and grasp at something new?
To be alone – is that a thing to fear?
If only we could know what happens next.
To test each choice and run it carefully.
We cannot hope to measure that effect.
The futures cloaked and will not let us see.
I think I will decline to go this time.
Before I bother others aimlessly
I need to look inside and to define
the things I want, and who I mean to be.
(ALICE gets out her phone)

ALICE (ctd) Oh, Mary

It's Alice here. Really?

No, no, no. Party, Ted's there, next week?

No, I'd love to come, honestly. Sweet.

Come and see you tomorrow? Great. I'll get the details when we meet.

(pause)

I wonder where on earth that that came from?

I thought I had decided not to go.

The words came tumbling out and then were gone.

My mind was changed with I the last to know.

Apparently, my mouth can't hear my brain.

It is no shock to me, I know the times

the two have fallen out, and yet again

they both are stood apart and not in line.

The heart and head are never on good terms.

They fight and clash as siblings often do.

It is our curse that they can never learn

to recognize the others point of view.

But even so, what was it made that shift?

Our motives are more complex than we know.

We think we steer the ship but are adrift

on deeper, older tides which flow below.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

SCENE 3

The stage is divided into two. Stage right, GARY is stood alone. Stage left, MARY is sorting laundry on the table. They are unaware of each other as the stage structure indicates they are in their own houses. GARY speaks first.

GARY Ted is my friend
but where does that begin or end?
No, seriously.
I have been considering this lately.
The ties we make, however unlikely,
and how this might reflect
some hidden need in ourselves we do not detect.
Who becomes a friend
and on what criteria does that depend?
What is the defining feature?
Do I need to look any deeper?
Perhaps we look for some part of our own character
to seek out that trait, then welcome it in another?
Or do we search for attributes we value, to bring them closer?
Or is it the witless prose of blind chance
rewriting our lives with the ink of circumstance?
To think this through, I will dissect each part
and Ted is as good as any place to start.

(two people in uniform wheel on TED in a glass case on casters. They flank him. He looks like an exhibit. He is wearing his usual retro clothing)

GARY *(pointing at TED)*
Dim, dim, he is not dim
but if you did say dim, you might think of him.
I think he is quite sharp, but as you can tell
you could not find brain easily, it is hid so well.
Some would say his hair is like straw.
I would not. Though as I look some more.....
And his clothes, his style,
neither has been seen for a while.
Some would point a finger and mock.
I would not. Science may, one day, reverse the clock.

GARY (ctd) Others say he is dull and slow.

Dull, no!

Well, perhaps a little.

I would not necessarily quibble.

But slow, slow?

Some might say so, but I say no.

Though his pace one step adrift, and sedentary,
he will get there eventually.

But his feet. I don't know what to say.

*(TED slightly breaks static pose and slowly begins to look
down worriedly)*

GARY I do not want to be uncharitable in any way
but you have not seen their like before.
Misshapen lumps which spread on the floor.
They are too long for a start.
Lumpy, ridged, and flat in part.
A horrible challenge to the shoemakers art.
Feet that have no place
fitted to the human race.
They do not look like me or you.
More suited for circus life or perhaps a zoo.

*(TED is wheeled off, waves quite subtly with one hand as
being pushed away)*

GARY Note, that is friendship for you. No matter how grim
do you see the way that I stick up for him?
So what then is true friendship?
Some might say it is merely companionship,
whilst others of a more lyrical nature
might venture,
say, love without desire?
But I'm not sure that's what's required.
It feels uncomfortable: not quite manly
enough. So, let us call it something far less fancy.
A bond
or common link that we can draw upon.
But what is this search for names and labels? The reason?
I am searching for some reasonable definition
of friend that I can still fit within

GARY (ctd) or one day get back in.

Regardless of fate or design

I have not done well by him. Friends: we whine
about them, then push and pull them in all directions
to fit in with our various machinations.

But this time

I have overstepped a line.

This once, simple ruse
has taken on different hues.

And whilst there is an element of self-preservation
in my motivation

I will do right by Ted this time.

Supply him with my killer lines.

Update his clothes, his hair, his general bearing.

That grim trio, which, will be no straightforward thing
and make of him, if not the perfect man,
the best version that I can.

What I see,

that is what Alice will see.

*(GARY sits and is still. MARY speaks. She is stood by the
table stage left sorting through sheets and towels using her
hands throughout)*

MARY I am one of the lucky ones.

Who would have thought that married so young
we would still be here today?

But let me be the first to say

this has been no fairy story,

no trite romantic drivel. There is no mystery.

It has involved hard work and tenacity.

And yes, there has been compromising,

And yes, we have had shouting

matches as any couple has. But the reason

we are here? We have both held to that self-same vision.

Family, house, stability. That, that is worth the sacrifice.

Nothing valuable comes without a price.

A forgotten virtue, longevity.

And who would not be content, happy?

When I look at what we have achieved, our life today,

it would be unreasonable to feel any other way.

Wouldn't it? (*angrier*) It would be stupid and senseless to feel any other way.

HUSBANDS VOICE OFFSTAGE

Mary, I can't find the case. I need to pack for the conference this evening while I have the chance.

MARY (*towards offstage*) It's in the spare room by the radiator.

Don't forget, I'm going out for coffee with Alice later.

(*to audience*) I think about love a lot.

What it is and what it is not.

Is there a bargain to be made?

For each new love one has to fade?

Or is it unlimited, simply flows

however much it expands and grows?

I have looked at love more than most.

Perhaps, I have looked too long, too close.

Like a collector who pins out every specimen,

carefully teases out each limb,

but somehow strips the butterfly of its wing.

When young and impressionable

everything is so simple.

Black and white,

wrong and right.

Older, we realise that life

wields a more subtle knife.

If, say, hypothetically,

a woman fell out of love with somebody,

say, a partner, husband, blamelessly, unintentionally,

what a strange, featureless existence that would be.

Stumbling on

guarding emotion,

telling no-one.

Learning to avoid a direct eye.

Learning to deny

even herself. Still called to speak the physical lie.

How lucky that person is not you or I.

HUSBANDS VOICE OFFSTAGE

Are these my washed stuff scattered on the floor?

MARY (*towards offstage*) No. The clean stuff are in the second drawer.

(*towards audience*) Words are powerful.

Belligerent and unreasonable.

MARY (ctd) They can betray us.

But when we keep them as prisoners
they grow inside, fester and eat away at us.
Then we dare not let them go.

We know
they would not leave quietly, but race away
and in their haste wash everything built so carefully, away.
Perhaps this imaginary woman had love but was not meant
to hold on to it indefinitely. Nothing is permanent.
Who does not remember every romance?
Most beauty only exists in transience.
Truly, it is life's meanest laugh
that we mainly value what we do not have.
That is true? Isn't it? On losing anything, we value it more
then when we held it all too easily, before?

HUSBANDS VOICE OFFSTAGE

Mary. None of these things are sorted out.

MARY (*towards offstage*) I'm coming up there to sort you out.

Just put what you can in it
I'll be up there in a minute.
(*to audience*) Love lets us be the most complete that we can be.
I believe that passionately.
We look down and scan the world, smugly.
Pity others.
If only they could be like us.
Their touch duller, taste blander, vision poor,
for surely, no-one has ever felt the way we feel before.
(*puts towels down, comes to front of stage to directly address audience*)
So if I live vicariously
do not judge me, still less pity me.
There are worse headlines in the world
than boy meets girl.
And what is better than new romance?
And if I have the chance
to even be the smallest part of that
I'll throw my hat
into the ring
and see what fate will bring.
Alice. This will be my gift to her.

MARY (ctd) I will coach her,
mould her,
and make of her, if not the perfect woman,
than the best version that I can.
What I see,
that is what Ted will see.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

SCENE 4

The Smith brother's hideout.

EDWIN Do you know Seth, this is our time.
It has been a long, hard climb
but I really think we are there.
From scrabbling in the dust, going nowhere,
to having the good life within sight.
I can almost taste it. The Smith brothers name up in lights.

SETH Whoa, hang on
and stop talking about us in the third person.
The Smith brothers. It's weird. There's a lot of hard work ahead.
We can't take anything for granted.
Everything needs to be planned out. Every angle covered.

EDWIN I know,
I know.
You've said all that before
but this feels like we're pushing at an open door.
That guy John heading to prison
has got to leave things open.
No way he can control everything remotely.
It's our opportunity.

SETH Slow down, slow down. Yes, barring any legal trickery.
But whether he goes in or not
we need to plan for either. We have one shot
and one shot only. These are high stakes.
We can't afford mistakes.

EDWIN Did you see all the messages?
Who does he think he is?
Didn't he think we'd know he'd come looking for us?
I hear he's been sniffing around in all our local pubs
and clubs.

SETH Case in point. Plan ahead.
No way he'll ever find us here. Instead

SETH (ctd) we'll choose where it will go down.
It's no good just throwing muscle around.
We're undermanned against him. Need to pick our time and ground.

EDWIN Seth, as always, you are a genius.
Is there anything we can use against him, any weakness?

SETH Good thinking!
You're learning.
He is, apparently, a family man.
His only weak point. So that's the plan.
My sources tell me
there is to be a party
which his precious sister Alice will be attending.
So, as always, he will be attending.
We'll turn up fully prepared
and catch him completely unaware.

EDWIN As I said, a genius.
No chance against the two of us.
We'll let him know what territory
we want, what our price will be.
With his sister Alice there
he will not dare
to kick things off. If he does, nothing too direct
but an implied threat
to any, say, near siblings.

SETH Yes. So let's get on our party things.
Did you get any pictures of him? A recent photo?

EDWIN No.
Keeps an incredibly low profile. No pictures anywhere.
We'll need to ask around when we get there.

SETH Not ideal, but not a problem either.
So, a big evening ahead brother.

(END OF SCENE)

ACT II

SCENE 5

Musical interlude.

A party. MARY and GARY are stood looking over the party. Various people milling around. TED is in a far corner upstage left. This time, very smartly dressed and styled.

GARY So, we are finally here.
The ring is right before us. The crowds cheer.
The bout about to begin.
And your girl? Ready and willing?

MARY In training all week.
Every last word she says will be sweet.
No longer contrary and irascible
and knows she is not allowed to hit him. Not even a little.

GARY That is a good start.
For my part
clothes, style, manner - all thoroughly gone through.
No longer the shapeless, lump of manhood you once knew.

MARY Gary, just think, we will be responsible
for getting them together. Isn't that wonderful?
No really, apart from all that nonsense with her brother and stuff
we might be the reason they fall in love.

GARY Steady on.
In theory, yes, nothing can go wrong
but I have been around far too long
to pre-empt anything. Fate, eh? Ever since I was young
it has had its claws in me.
Other people, get away with all sorts of villainy
but I do something wrong, and it's like a big, karmic boomerang
I am walking, minding my own business, and BANG,
hits me on the back of the head.
And do I deserve it? No, instead,
the punishment never fits the crime
it has always been multiplied a thousand times.

GARY (ctd) So yes, fingers crossed. But before any celebrations begin we need to watch for fate stepping in.

MARY Gary, what are you rambling about?
I'm sure the heavens have more to look out for than you! Besides, this is Ted and Alice's story. So even if it's true, there had better be no residual calamity, attached to you, that seeps through to influence what they might say or do. You think fate is tough. It's nothing to what I would do to you. Relax. Take a deep breath. It's all fine. Enjoy yourself. Look, I can see Ted. Wow. He looks great. Good job. Completely reinvented. Alice is to be fashionably late. And there is more than a chance that she may make a memorable entrance.

(people are walking about. *ROBB* is stood alone when the *SMITH* brothers enter from the audience and come up behind him)

EDWIN Hey you! We're looking for this guy called John. Eyes out. Is he anywhere about?

ROBB Oh, right. Do you know what he looks like? Do you?

SETH Dickhead. If we did would we be asking you? Look, we heard he'd be here.

ROBB Yes, I can see him over there. Wait, are you the Smith brothers? I've seen your pictures.

EDWIN Well, famous, eh? Our fame proceeds us. Yes, that's us.

ROBB I'll let him know straight away. Is he expecting you guys?

SETH Let's just say it will be a nice surprise.

(*ROBB* actually goes over to *TED*)

ROBB Hi. Remind me, what job do you do Ted?

TED Accountancy services if you're interested.

ROBB Yes, I remember now. Well, those two guys have been recommended by a client and are looking for someone new to do their accounts. So, if you'd like to talk through the things you offer, and remember, lots of detail, it's a great opportunity. I need to rush off and find someone urgently. My advice – don't pause for breath. Get in quickly.

(ROBB waves at SMITH brothers to come over to TED.
ROBB exits)

SETH (*to TED, threatening pointing finger*) My brother and I need to clarify....

TED No, no, please say no more,
I know just what you're here for.
My services: basically, you do what you want each year
and for a small fee, I clear up any mess. It's not dear.
I will keep the authorities at bay
and out of your way.
And let me add by way of further clarification
you are under no obligation
whatsoever. There are advantages
to using my services
which I'll go through
but its entirely up to you.

EDWIN Really? Everyone said it was compulsory.

TED No! Absolutely not. I'm so sorry
for any misunderstanding.
Let me describe my methods and ways of working.
Of course, we can't discuss individual cases here, walls have ears,
but I have been doing this for years.
For example, when I need to dig for information, tease out the story,
I use scissors quite extensively. (*TED gets out a pair of scissors*)
To begin, I like to cut and pull things apart a bit
and then I spread everything out and see how it all fits.
Are you old school? How do you stand?

SETH Well, I think we generally use anything that comes to hand.

TED That's fine. I usually snip away all the peripheral stuff to start until I get down to the important parts.
I am relentless. I have worked on problems for weeks.
Off course, I also use more advanced techniques.
I leave nothing to doubt.
All very precise. And I even keep the bits that I cut out.
Stored quite securely, you understand.
Can't risk those getting into the wrong hands.
This is no idle boast.
I can send examples through the post.

(EDWIN and SETH *recoil and shake their heads*)

TED My main strength is I am focussed and entirely dispassionate.

EDWIN Funnily enough, we were just talking about that.

TED Well, on that very point, just between me and you,
I recently had to sort out my mum and dad too.
Mother was really taking liberties, making all sorts of 'wild' claims,
and dad was just the same.
Now, you two, you can't tell on me.
You really shouldn't do your family.

EDWIN No, no. Your secrets safe, honestly.

TED Mother did nothing but scream and shout.
I didn't waver. I cut everything out.
The fuss she made! The pleading and such,
I nearly couldn't finish I was laughing so much.
I know all this is a little boastful
I should not speak of individual cases, its awful
but it's simply to demonstrate that I am nothing if not professional.

SETH No, I think I speak for both of us
what you have outlined might be ideal for our purposes.
On second thoughts, we could be interested in using your services.

TED That's great. There's only a small retainer payment,
and then I only charge for each specific task that's sent.
And as an introductory offer, entirely free,
I'll get rid of any individual problem that you send to me.

EDWIN (*moving out of earshot to talk to SETH*)
That reporter. The one that printed our pictures, smeared
us in the paper. I wouldn't be sad if he disappeared.

SETH (*to TED*) Yes, I've got to say
these are surprisingly reasonable terms. We'll send details straight away.

TED Fantastic. I have to meet someone else now, so
enjoy the party, and we'll catch up and flesh things out before you go.

(TED walks over to where GARY is standing)

TED Gary, already a good evening.
You mentioned you got Alice's occupation wrong. Not modelling.
So what business is she in?

GARY She is an accountant just like you.
It's true!

TED I am not that simple. You are lying to me.

GARY Really! Really!
After all the madness that's gone on,
that is the thing that you pick upon!
(shouts) Mary – what work does she do?

MARY (*coming over*) She is an accountant Ted, just like you.

TED I am mortified. I am so sorry.
How could I have ever doubted you, Gary?

GARY Well, I understand. But it was very, very hurtful.

TED My apologies. I know you could never be anything other than entirely truthful.

*(GARY nervously plays with collar and looks even more
nervously upwards)*

GARY All forgotten. We'll say no more.
Look. Here she comes. Wow. You lucky devil. Get out on that dancefloor.

(ALICE enters and is very expensively dressed)

MARY Didn't I say?
Some entrance in every way.

(ALICE and TED move towards each other. MARY and GARY are just behind, trying to listen in)

GARY *(to MARY)* Do you see that. The great clothes, the bling.
My guy is primed, ready to explode like a coiled spring.

TED *(to ALICE)* I would just like to say, nay assert,
that I am not a pervert.

(GARY and MARY wince in background and spin away shaking heads)

ALICE Wow. That is a smooth opening line.
But most people are presumed innocent of a crime
until proven guilty.
Only after which, they are assigned the penalty.
Whilst the innocent, at the same time,
do not have any such thoughts of guilt on their mind.
So they don't go blurting it was not me!
When others are not even aware there has been any skulduggery.
Do you get my drift?
Those people who have that subtle shift
already in their mind, and approach saying what they are not,
are often exactly that very thing! Because that is their lot!
Don't worry, I am just teasing you
which I suspect is all too easy to do.
You are looking nice....

TED You too.

ALICE I thought that you might like a dance or two
And we might start again? Start from here?

TED I think that would be good idea.
(TED begins Ted dancing)

ALICE But perhaps a little more mellow. *(grabs his arm, starts like a ballroom dance)*
I will show you the steps and you can follow.

(ALICE and TED move away dancing. EDWIN and SETH are downstage left)

EDWIN Well, that was unnerving.
The guys obsessed with killing.
His parents too. And the horrible detail about how she cried!
I'm glad that he's on our side.

SETH So am I. A surprising evening. Still, now we're here
there's four single babes over there.
Time for the Smith brothers to slip into gear.

EDWIN Hey, you four are hot.

(SETH and EDWIN approach ANNABELLE, BARBARA, JUNE and BERTHA from the back who turn around)

ANNABELLE Well, in my case you are quite correct. Are you not?
However, I have no vacancy at the moment
for another lying, deceitful man to torment
me to within an inch of my sanity. But when I do, I'll let you know.

BARBARA Annabelle, no.
I'm sure they didn't mean to be rude.
You'll have to excuse my friend. She has a bit of an attitude.
Men problems. Well, no in fact, she is always in a bad mood.

JUNE I think clarification is warranted. They need to be more precise.
Hot could mean physically, that is temperature wise, or quite nice.
Although, I think the scale that they mean
is from the faintly desirable to the obscene.

BERTHA Yes, but I think the use of an initial sexist comment as an opening line
reveals more of the hidden turmoil inside than you might recognise at the time.
In fact, I think there are a host of underlying attitudes which act as a cover
for a deep, and unresolved abyss of feelings.and resentment of their mother.

EDWIN Huh! *(loudly, then EDWIN turns to SETH panicking)*
How did she know?
Let's go.

SETH (to EDWIN) No, no.
Try again.
We're gangsters. We can't be seen to be browbeaten
by four idiot women.

EDWIN So babes, play your cards right
you could have a piece of this tonight.

ANNABELLE Oh, good lord. He didn't just say that did he?
He's on something? Isn't he?
That's the worst pick-up line ever.
I'm going to text it to show my sister.

BARBARA In this case, I have to agree with you.
They need a good talking to.
If my Matthew were here, he's so manly, I bet he wouldn't hesitate
to beat them to a pulp. Ohhhhhh, yes. That would be great.

JUNE I too must decline
without any analysis this time.
Although in science, in theory all problems are absorbing,
some are simply not worth the solving.

BERTHA Girls, I can't believe the obvious issues and deeper themes that you are missing.
Clearly, there are issues of self-esteem and masculinity bubbling up. Interesting!
To me it points to repressed femininity. Also, the inner child, crying, alone in pain.
and we all know where that is going....

SETH, EDWIN (together)we do?.....

BERTHAback to mother again!

EDWIN Why does she keep doing that?
I'm going to ring mum and have this out when we get back.

SETH Shut up, will you. Listen here, just so you know
you are not dealing with a couple of ordinary joes.
Far from it. Oh no.
You are looking at men of some importance.

ANNABELLE Men of importance with zero chance.

BARBARA Me too. I'm keeping my distance.

JUNE And I agree, for once.

BERTHA Not a chance.

(EDWIN, SETH, ANNABELLE, BARBARA, JUNE look expectantly at BERTHA waiting for more)

BERTHA What!

It's all I've got.

(at this point EDWIN notices ALICE who has stopped dancing momentarily and is stood speaking with TOM. He points at ALICE)

EDWIN We're getting no-where here
but look over there.

SETH Wow. Oh my.
What a babe. You go for the girl; I'll get rid of the guy.

(EDWIN and SETH start to walk towards ALICE. JOHN enters with ROBB who points to the brothers. JOHN moves quickly to intercept them before they can reach ALICE)

JOHN Gentleman, gentleman. Please forgive me.
I am Mark from hospitality.
Tonight, when you came through the door
you won a prize, but my staff lost sight of you on the dancefloor.

EDWIN Sod off. Why don't you go find
someone else to bother. We have better things on our mind.

SETH Look at these faces.
Not our first day at the races.

JOHN Honestly,
the prize is quite substantial and completely free.

SETH Look here prat. Do you know who we are? Kings of the scam.

SETH (ctd) We accept this, and suddenly I am
sat in a lecture, or writing cheques for some opportunity in Dubai
which will disappear before the ink is dry.

JOHN Absolutely not, sir. This is a national promotion
free of any financial obligation.

EDWIN Really, well how did we win?

JOHN A chain-wide campaign. You're the ten thousandth customer to come in.
Of course, the drawback is you will be required to be in pictures
with local dignitaries and some well-known celebrities.
Just for publicity purposes.

SETH Celebrities? Celebrities?
We could live with that. So, what exactly are you going to do for us?

JOHN Well, part of the good news
is that you've won a luxury cruise.

EDWIN For two?

JOHN Yes, and for two personal guests too.

SETH Do you hear that girls? Well, who knew?
Not so posh now are we? Two vacancies. Form a queue.

JOHN And there is also an additional cash prize
which I can actually hand to you now. Of course, away from prying eyes.
My colleague has arranged a room with some privacy
where we can hand the money over immediately.
Let me show you.

EDWIN Wow. Some night this. Watch out losers, winners coming through.

JOHN Yes, I'm sure I needn't tell such hard-working entrepreneurs
that sometimes we do get the things that we deserve.

(JOHN starts to guide EDWIN and SETH offstage. After a few seconds ROBB follows with a sack on his back. He lets it drop. It thuds, clearly full of metal objects. He follows

*JOHN a few paces back dragging the sack behind him
noisily. They all exit)*

*(MARY and GARY are standing. The lighting is adjusted to
show time has passed. Eventually ALICE and TED dance
up to them)*

TED Hi. I'm sorry we've kept you waiting.
Good lord. We've been dancing all evening.

MARY No, no, we're okay.
We're here anyway.

ALICE I can't remember when I've had such fun.
All with a certain someone
who after an uncertain start
has more than played his part
in the proceedings and become an excellent dancer.

TED I can only say, I had a good teacher.
And I can't remember
when I have talked so much
or had such
a good time. Thanks for the invite.
This has been a great night.

ALICE And in-between spells of deep-sea diving
he does accounting. (*ALICE looks pointedly at MARY*)
But I have to say, all the trouble and bother
of putting this together,
I wanted you two to be the first to know,
the very first to know,
and I think that I speak for both of us....

TED You do, you do, you speak for both of us.

ALICE This man here has been a godsend.
I want you to know we are going to be (*pause*) the very best of friends.

*(GARY and MARY rush forward arms outstretched, but
stop in their tracks)*

GARY What?
What?

MARY Are you sure? Friends? Friends?

ALICE Friends, yes. After our bad start a happy end.
That's good isn't it?
I thought that you'd be happy with it.

(GARY bends over to floor weeping)

GARY I'm a broken man.
I am. I am.

MARY Oh yes, that's wonderful.
You must excuse Gary. He's a little emotional.
(to ALICE) Could we have a word? Gary, I'm sure
Ted might also like to chat or something more?

(MARY and ALICE walk stage right to talk alone)

GARY *(pulling himself together)*
The friend zone. Remember, if you stay in there,
you'll never see her underwear.

TED Gary, I can only state
that I wouldn't hesitate
to take her out.
But she has left no doubt
that she doesn't feel that way.
And to be honest, I may feel the same way.
I'm sorry if it's been disappointing
for you and Mary. We just seem to be missing something.

ALICE Now, before you start on me....

MARY No, I understand completely.

ALICE You do?

MARY I do.
It's that 'spark' thing, isn't it?

MARY (ctd) That indefinable insanity, that fuse when lit
blows all sense and logic aside.
That knot inside.
We have tried
and failed. No shame in that.
No shame at all in that.

ALICE Don't get me wrong.
Ted is absolutely lovely and I longed
for something more.
Perhaps, one-day, who knows for sure?
At times, I thought anyone would do.
I could make-do
but that isn't me.
Why write my problems into someone else's story?
Which is better
being lonely alone or being lonely together?
No. If I am doing this, I want the real thing.
The passion, the grief, the highs and lows, everything.
It's all fine.
It didn't work out this time
but now I am back in the swing
who knows what life might bring?

GARY Ted, you are going to question my sanity
but after the initial shock, this outcome absolutely suites me.
Better to be the observer
than the perpetrator.
Come on at half-time with oranges and sympathy.
Berate the referee.
Commiserate
or celebrate
a finer, better state to be.
The honest broker. That's the aim. Guilt free.
Happy to be just a member of the team.
So in future, go find women under your own steam.
Karma! Through blind luck I have got out of this with relative impunity
apart from a psychopath who may shortly be trying to kill me.

TED You know, they say that I'm strange
but you're seriously deranged.

GARY Probably.
So what about a cup of tea?

TED Spot on. I'll just go and get changed
and generally, re-arranged. (*exits*)

ALICE Strangely, and I don't know why, I feel more sorry for you.
Are you okay too?

MARY Me?
Don't worry about me
I am just being silly.
I always get too involved
and lose perspective. A fault easily solved
by a glass of wine or two.
This is all about you.
And I'll do everything I can
to get you a man
or at least a shot
if I have to go through the whole sorry, hapless, gormless, lot.

(GARY makes a 'T' sign to MARY)

MARY I see the boys are going for tea.

ALICE You go on. I'll just change into something more comfy. (*exits*)

(the party dissipates and people exit. The table has been moved to downstage left. GARY and MARY sit at the table drinking tea)

GARY This has been a complete pain.
I will never get involved with this sort of thing again.
You know, I feel completely relieved.

MARY Well I am a little aggrieved.
I thought we had a matched pair.
And then out of nowhere
boom. Back to square one. Zero. Naught.

GARY Well, park that thought.
We still have the bother

GARY (ctd) with her psychotic brother.

You are good at this. Put a plan to together
to placate him but leave me out altogether.
My nerves are shattered. I am not built
for guilt.
If he still wants to murder me
I'd be grateful if he could do it quickly.

MARY First you're in then you're out
Then you shake it all about.
This is not the hokey-cokey.
Still, at least we're back to some semblance of normality.
Even with the best will, some things just aren't meant to be.
You need to take it gracefully
and move on. Let's have our tea.

(TED enters wearing his usual retro clothing, large collar, tank top, and flares. He sits at the table. ALICE then enters wearing a very baggy loose-fitting knitted jumper, long shapeless skirt and clogs and walks to the table. It is obvious that ALICE and TED are suddenly checking each other out)

TED *(watching ALICE, to GARY)* Wow. Glory be.
You didn't tell me she was so raunchy.

ALICE *(arriving at table, to MARY)* I know I mustn't stare
but do you see his flares?
Well I never.
What a sharp dresser.

GARY Ted, back to the model trains tonight?

TED Yes, that's right.
I've bought a bridge and some new signal lights.

ALICE Ted, are you a railway buff too?
Mary, you didn't tell me. I am too.
I have loads of engines, most of which are early.
I write the advice column for railway weekly.

TED Wait! No! You don't write 'Tell Abbey'
do you? I am confused Ted
from Hampstead.
You sorted out my turntable problem.

ALICE Oh Ted, that was you? I'd almost forgotten.

ALICE, TED (together) Rub liberally with grease
and wait for it to release.

ALICE (to MARY) Good grief. Sixties clothing. And a train spotter.
Could he get any hotter?

TED (to GARY) Look at that! Do you think its crocheted, or even hand knitting?
I bet that's terribly rough against her skin.
She's brave but I bet that's really rubbing.
(*makes guttural sounds*)
Imagine her delicate body scratching against all that harsh clothing.

*(GARY and MARY get up to stand together at the
periphery of the table increasingly perplexed. From this
point ALICE and TED don't notice them as they only look
at each other)*

ALICE Do you like my pullover?

TED I'd like to pull-you-over.

(ALICE and TED giggle)

TED The stitch -
I just wondered which?

ALICE Oh that. I'm a bit wild. Sometimes I slip, sometimes I pearl.

TED Oh, you are a naughty girl.

*(ALICE and TED giggle again. ALICE starts playing peek
a boo with large sleeves over eyes while GARY and MARY
talk)*

GARY (to MARY) That last sentence or two.
Did they make any sense to you?

MARY Shhh. I think we are looking at the strange twilight world of a male train spotter and his girl.

TED I own several Hornby's with vintage track.
Some new old parts still in the pack.
Dad sold them in his shop. Loads of stock
but he'd always keep the best bits back.

ALICE I have been reluctant to share it
but I have a rare boiler made for the American market.
If you want a little peek that would be fine.

TED Well I don't mind.
You show me yours and I'll show you mine.

(GARY retches, while MARY silently berates him)

ALICE I also have the prototype transmission
never in production.
But perhaps we should talk about marriage
before I let you see my undercarriage.

(MARY retches, while GARY pats her back)

TED I have some photos of my set-up on my phone here.
I take them with me everywhere.

(ALICE and TED look at the pictures)

GARY Has the world gone mad or is it me?
I don't understand the things I see.
I know we've worked for this all along
but this is weird, and frankly wrong.

MARY Nothing! Then suddenly fire, flames, conflagration.
Due to what? Knitting, toy trains, flares, and a plastic station?
How am I supposed to begin
to factor stuff like this in?

ALICE Ted, you've probably heard this before
but it is huge and almost covers the floor.

TED It's true.
I've tunnelled through
to the kitchen.
I have been driven.
But lately, I have been wondering
what is the plan? Where is all this heading?
No matter how big the set
if you have no-one to share it
what's the point? I suppose what I'm trying to say
in a roundabout way
is sometimes one station master will not do.
Perhaps it's more fun with two.
So, what I'm saying, and I don't need an immediate decision,
is would you perhaps like to consider the position?

ALICE Would I have to wear a uniform and hat?

TED I would insist on that.

(ALICE and TED stare into each other's eyes)

GARY *(to MARY)* Good lord what is happening?
I'm panicking, I'm panicking.

(MARY wafts GARY with a handkerchief)

GARY This is unnerving me.
It's like some twisted parody.
We need to stop it quickly.

(GARY starts to move towards ALICE and TED)

MARY What?
No, you're not.
Over my dead body.
This could be my greatest victory.

*(MARY covers GARY'S mouth to stop him speaking and
wrestles him to the ground)*

TED Well, some of my old engines won't go.
They run on some sort of vintage track. You wouldn't know....

ALICE I have several early gauges. One of those might fit.
Perhaps we could make a night of it.

(ALICE leans over to gently kiss TED. They get up to leave holding hands)

TED We need to tell Gary and Mary we're leaving first. Do you know where....

(ALICE and TED look down and see MARY and GARY wrestling on the floor. MARY and GARY stop and look up)

ALICE Oh there.
You know, I love them dearly. But they are such a strange pair.

(ALICE and TED exit. MARY and GARY get up dusting themselves off. JOHN passes ALICE and TED coming in. JOHN goes to MARY and GARY)

JOHN Well, you aced the test,
I am impressed.
Alice looks happy
so I am happy.

GARY Have you cut yourself? Are you fine?

JOHN No, I don't think that's mine.
It is unfortunately
a work problem. Some people bleed so haphazardly.

(ROBB enters)

ROBB *(to JOHN)* The 'packages' have been collected
and as requested
everything wiped down and sprayed, so
I suggest we go.

JOHN Well, we need to be gone.
Circumstances dictate that we must, well, cut and run.
But you two, job well done.

(JOHN and ROBB exit)

MARY We've been rushing around
when all we had to do was sit them down.
So, just to be clear
because I'm struggling here
that literarily everything we've said or done has, to a greater part,
only served to keep them apart.
Anything I've missed?

GARY No, I think you've got the gist.
Fate, and another sodding twist.
Wait. Can you hear that? Oh hell.
Can't you hear it? The bells, the bells! *(there is no sound audible at this moment)*

MARY I don't know.
One moment sane, the next moment Quasimodo.

(suddenly, there is the sound of wedding bells increasing in volume. GARY looks crestfallen, MARY delighted. People arrive on stage bringing wedding paraphernalia. Eventually, TED is facing ALICE with GARY and MARY at either side. The OFFICIAL is in front, the guests gathering in a semi-circle behind)

OFFICIAL *(waves at crowd to move forward slightly)*
Please, please do come in.
Before we begin
I would like to say a few words now
to remind the couple of their vows.

(OFFICIAL speaks silently to ALICE and TED as the crowd move in and settle)

OFFICIAL Well, that all seems fine. The banns been read
and all is set to go ahead.
To begin the ceremony
a moment not of solemnity
but perhaps one of reflection
and quiet contemplation.

(GARY MARY, TED, ALICE kneel as the crowd bow their heads. Everyone is now frozen in position. Following this,

ALICE, TED, MARY and GARY each get up in turn to make brief speeches, after which they resume their kneeling position and the next person rises to speak)

ALICE (*gets up*) A moment put aside to take things in,
to look around and memorise the scene
but in such mayhem where do you begin
to sort out what is real from what is dream?
For days like these, they are so quickly gone.
We build them up, then watch them slip away.
They are so few and far we should hold on
and drain each drop of nectar from the day.
So if I take my time, please bear with me
for standing here it is no simple task
to take on board, commit to memory,
these all-too fragile hours which pass so fast. (*kneels, still*)

TED (*gets up*) Our lives can sometimes take a different turn
and suddenly we find ourselves adrift
in new and untried roles which we must learn
as older roles we played fade into mist.
Who would have thought that I'd be here today?
How quickly life can change! Romance and me!
Now marriage is a few brief words away.
Another way to live - person to be. (*kneels, still*)

MARY (*gets up*) Well here we are. To think I played a part.
There is no place that I would rather be.
And Alice looks so nice, it breaks my heart.
This is my greatest ever victory.
But I have learned my lesson, it is true.
You cannot plan for love. That much I know.
But look at Stan. He looks so lonely too.
I think that I might give it one more go. (*kneels, still*)

GARY (*gets up, pause*) My tools are getting rust. The sheen is gone.
I think the roof is leaking on my shed.
If I can slip away before too long
I'll hit the shops and buy some strips of lead. (*long pause*)
I don't suppose they'd mind if I took Ted. (*kneels, still*)

(OFFICIAL indicates for GARY MARY, TED, ALICE to rise and everybody moves normally again)

OFFICIAL Our nature is the subject of debate.
What makes us, us? What is humanity?
Mere driftwood cast upon the tide of fate
or do we rise above that shapeless sea?
And in that question lies the very nub
of what we think we are, choose to believe.
Are we much more than flesh, innately good,
or born to play a walk-on part then leave?
So - tendon, gristle, blood – is that enough?
But what of hope and faith. But what of love?
For we are made of better, brighter, stuff.
The very, very best of which is love.

OFFICIAL (to *TED*) Ted, do you?

TED I do.

OFFICIAL (to *ALICE*) Alice, you do too?

ALICE I do too.

OFFICIAL An end to all trouble and strife,
may I wish you both a happy life.
I now pronounce you man and wife.

(TED and ALICE kiss to cheers, music starts. Everyone else in motion whilst GARY walks away, takes jacket off, comes back to centre stage and clicks fingers at which time everyone freezes in position. GARY is standing by TED)

GARY So here we are at journey's end.
I hope that we may now part as friends.
A simple tale it is true
but we are simple folk, as are you. (*pointing to audience*)
Before we go
I would have you know
a final poem by way of conclusion
for what another verse set in motion.
And also, it will relate
a brief and simple update.

(GARY puts his hand on TED'S shoulders)

GARY My friend previously so good and true
has taken lately to doe eyes and smiles
so that passers-by who express a view
consider him both mad and infantile.
Yet family and colleagues still proclaim
his thought and wit as equal of many
but all he can do is to speak her name
and as for reason, has hardly any.
Speculation is keen and often lewd
on the route and means he came to such strife.
Both brain and backbone completely removed
job more complete than by a surgeon's knife.
Would that we all in such a state could be,
(shouts out to crowd)
cursed as a fool for living happily.

(music restarts and people move again)

(CURTAIN)

