

Scene 1: A day in September

Laurence is standing onstage looking out. The impression should be that he is in the auditorium and the stage is in the distance. He is talking to Dennis, the stage manager, over the cans.

LAURENCE: Dennis.... Dennis! – why's that bloody parcan only lighting down stage left? It's centre stage the old pro's will be jostling for... *(after a pause lights come up – inhales with horror)* God above Dennis, where did that tacky standard lamp with all those pink tassels come from?..... What? *(Pause as he listens to Dennis's explanation)* Oh for heaven's sake, regional theatre and its murder mysteries will be the death of me. *(Pulls himself together)* O.K. Dennis, let's get this rehearsal on the road. *(Pause – leans forward)* What did that new girl say?Tell her speak up. *(Pause – moves his head from side to side in an effort to see her.)* Why is she hiding behind that pink lampshade; she looks as if she's headless. God, where did we get her from, she's made of MDF. *(Shouts)* Project. Give it more breath – *(he gesticulates)* the man writhing in pain up in the gallery has as much right to know what this rubbish is about as the man snoozing in the comfort of the stalls. *(Pause as he listens further)* Aaargh!Dennis stop the rehearsal, send her to my office and give the others a tea break. *(Starts to go then returns)* Oh and tell David I mean tea, not whisky. Yesterday he staggered and fell over when the gun went off; and he's not even playing the dead body, *(Mutters to himself as he goes)* Though I wish he was!

Laurence's office. He checks his Facebook page on his phone.

I don't believe it. Only ten likes for my school's version of Macbeth. *(Scrolls down).*

'Too many deaths?!'

'Only sad people talk to themselves'. *(Shouts at phone)* They're called soliloquies you moron.

'Hubble, bubble, bore and befuddle'... Oh LOL!

Why don't you lot try producing Shakespeare on a shoestring.

(Putting phone away and collapsing in his chair) Why fight it Laurence old chap - just give the paying public what they want: a corpse before the interval; time for a drink and wee; a snooze during the red herrings and a wake-up call for the whodunnit.

Bella knocks. Laurence pulls himself together.

LAURENCE: Enter the lion's den.

BELLA: *(Entering nervously)* You wanted to see me?

LAURENCE: Yes, my dear – I wanted to ask what they taught you at drama school?

BELLA: Well, they er...

LAURENCE: Any acting involved?

BELLA: *(Bridles)* Of course, for stage and screen.

LAURENCE: Well, before you get to the dizzy heights of mumbling your lines on TV, you need to pass the audibility test in theatre. That way, when you're on your way down, they'll be able to hear you in panto.

BELLA: *(Mumbling)* I'm sorry I....

LAURENCE: What?

BELLA: Oh, *(Louder)* I'm sorry.

LAURENCE: Right, now let's go through these opening lines, and don't forget that this is the first of a plethora of red herrings. The audience have done their morning crossword and need our help in delaying dementia before gin o'clock.

BELLA: 'Oh strewth, this room ain't half dusty. *(Moves around dusting feverishly)* I'm run off me feet I am, and that/Lady Letitia...

LAURENCE: More hatred.

BELLA: (*Too OTT to be believable*) And that Lady Letitia is too blinking mean to pay for two maids. I do me best to give/satisfaction,

LAURENCE: Too much. Cut back.

BELLA: Oooh I hates her and I'd like...I'd like...I'd like.....(*falters and breaks down*) Oh, I can't pitch it using this cod-Essex accent. The writer's a complete ass. (*Realises what she's just said*) Oh God, I'm sorry. It's....

LAURENCE: A masterpiece? (*Bella tries to nod convincingly*) Just missing three dimensional characters and a plot. (*Beat. They both laugh*) All right. Cut the comic-strip accent and do enough to indicate her working-class roots.

BELLA: But I'd have to change some of the words.

LAURENCE: They can't be any worse!

BELLA: (*Nervously takes deep breath then does the speech with conviction, energy and modulation*) 'Oh lor this room is so dusty. I'm run off m' feet and that Lady Letitia is too mean to pay for two maids. I do m' best to give satisfaction, and if she wants any new-fangled dishes tried I'm always ready to risk 'em. Oh I hate her. I'd like to fill her vol-au-vents with arsenic and lace her dumplings with weed-killer!

LAURENCE: A red herring to die for – so to speak! (*Pause – looks at her in a new light*) Good. Very good.

BELLA: Thank you. That means a lot. (*Beat*) I hope you don't mind me saying, I've admired your work for years.

LAURENCE: Ah. Talent and taste!

BELLA: (*She laughs*) I loved your production of 'Waiting for Godot'.

LAURENCE: Did you understand it?.... I'm not sure I did.

BELLA: (*She laughs and acts out the following melodramatically*) 'For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh (*She laughs*) Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors.'

LAURENCE: (*Also using the same acting style*) 'A knook? That was nearly sixty years ago...yes nearly sixty....You wouldn't think it to look at me would you? Compared to him I look like a young man, no? (*Pause*) Hat!

They both laugh.

BELLA: Pity there are no parts in it for women – as usual.

LAURENCE: I'm not sure our seaside audiences are ready for Becket! (*They both laugh. Pause*).

Where was it you trained?

BELLA: I went to Uni first - English at Durham - then annoyed my parents by taking a post-grad in acting.

LAURENCE: You won't pay off your student debt on our wages.

BELLA: No, but I'm hoping the experience will help me fulfil my secret ambition.

LAURENCE: A secret? Intriguing. Our secrets are the very definition of our inner selves.

BELLA: That's very perceptive.

LAURENCE: I think I read it somewhere..... And are you going to share this secret ambition?

BELLA: (*Laughs*) Then it wouldn't be secret would it?

LAURENCE: (*Beat; looks at her rather wistfully*) When you're young secrets are about controlling the future: when you're old, like me, they're about hiding the past.

BELLA: (*Mocking-flirtatious*) Ah, but you've got the secret of eternal youth.

LAURENCE: (*Somewhat flustered*) Yes, well. We'd better get back to rehearsal before David finishes the whisky and starts on the rum. Last time he did that he nearly decapitated Banquo with a practice sword.

They exit laughing.

Scene 2: That evening.

Laurence and Sams' kitchen. They enter carrying dinner plates to wash up. SFX of noisy washing machine.

LAURENCE: What on earth's that racket?

SAM: It's the spin cycle on the washing machine.

LAURENCE: Is it aiming for a lunar landing?

SAM: It'll be finished in a minute.

LAURENCE: You'll have to get boring Bob over to look at it.

SAM: it's all right for you – you don't have to put up with his 'That reminds me' stories.

LAURENCE; Worth it for cheap DIY. (*SFX dies away with a loud bang*) Ah peace at last. So, you were saying?

SAM: Where was I? Oh yes, Then she said Richard had moved out and was living in the London apartment with his secretary. Apparently, it's been going on for months and she had no idea.

LAURENCE: That's pretty much what I got too. He said she's only 28 and that he 'just couldn't help himself'. I told him he was a complete numbskull falling for someone nearly 30 years his junior, and that she wouldn't stick around when he's dribbling and drooling in a bath chair.

SAM: Heather's in absolute pieces.... she's unrecognisable. You know how well-groomed she always was? (*Laurence nods*) Well she's given up the Maggie Thatcher hairdo and is moping around in a shell-suit.

LAURENCE: Please tell me it's not fluorescent. (*Sam nods*) Dear God.

SAM: And the love-rat?

LAURENCE: Oh, Richard's all smug, self-satisfied smiles. He's started waxing his hair, what's left of it, into little spikes. (*Annoyed*) It's knocked twenty years off him.

SAM: I'd like to knock some sense into him!

LAURENCE: He's even started going clubbing with her.

SAM: Really? But he's always looked like an ageing John Travolta on the dance floor. I do hope he's given up that pointing move.

LAURENCE: I doubt it. 'Staying Alive' is very much on his mind right now because he (*mimics Richard*) 'loves how she makes him feel'.

SAM: What he's feeling is down there, (*indicates*) and he always was a selfish dick.

LAURENCE: He says he 'couldn't help falling in love with her'.

SAM: Love is a word used by adulterers to dignify selfishness... and lust.

LAURENCE: Mmm. (*Pause*) Perhaps Heather's at fault too.

SAM: What do you mean? Why must the blame be shared? She was a loyal wife who'd do absolutely anything for him; and a wonderful mother to those demon twins. What more could any man ask of her?

LAURENCE: You forgot to mention she's also potty. A cyberchondriac- full of complaints that nobody ever died of!

SAM: Anybody would go crackers living with him.

LAURENCE: Well something can't have been right if he wants to rewind his life, sell the house and go backpacking for a year.

SAM: Backpacking?!! Richard?!!! He wouldn't even walk their hound up the lane!

LAURENCE: Oh, it's probably a passing phase. A third-life crisis. He'll end up having a reality check.

SAM: Not when the reality is a taut little body with perky breasts! *(Pause while they each reflect upon this)* I mean, how can Heather compete with that? She's nearly 60 and no amount of Botox or filler is going to turn her into a young woman again. She'd just end up with a permanently surprised pillow face.

LAURENCE: I told him - you're trading a steak for a sausage.

SAM: It's his sausage that's got him into this mess.

LAURENCE: And he just said, he needed to feel alive before he dies.

SAM: Another high-minded excuse for low-lying intentions.

LAURENCE: *(Laughs smugly)* He won't be able to keep up with her.

SAM: He can get Viagra at the pharmacy.

LAURENCE: I thought you had to go to the doctors for that.

SAM: Not anymore.

LAURENCE: Really? No wonder he said he was turning into a contortionist.

Pause while they consider this rather differently.

Anyway, he'll pay the price for all that rampant sex. Even if it doesn't strain his he'll get snared by her need to procreate. *(He laughs triumphantly)* That'll scare him off.

SAM: Not when he can have his fun *and* create a 'mini-me'. He'll be like all those doting grandfathers you see, who laugh and play with their grandchildren, while the parent looks on thinking *(plaintive voice)* 'Why didn't you do that for me?'

LAURENCE: I'd rather learn Windows 10 at U3A than do the kiddie-thing again!

Pause.

SAM: We've been their closest friends for years. I think we should do something to help them.

LAURENCE: Richard doesn't need help; he needs therapy. And I'll leave the grieving widow to you.

SAM: *(Beat)* Right. Well I'm going to invite Heather to come and stay with us until she feels she can cope again.

LAURENCE: What?

SAM: You said you'd leave her to me.

LAURENCE: Yes, but Heather, here? I shall be *(tries to think of an excuse)*....rehearsing late into the night.

SAM: She likes you.

LAURENCE: That's the trouble.

SAM: Laurence, *(goes to him and cuddles up to him)*... promise you'll be kind to her. Make her feel like a woman again. Pretend you find her attractive.

LAURENCE: I'll need to take up method acting for that!

SAM: Please. Do it for me.

LAURENCE: (*Laughs*)... All right. For you, my wonderful woman, I'd do anything.

SAM: I know, my lovely man. (*Quick peck*) You just need to tell her she looks twenty years younger in that shell suit, and you think they're ready for a come-back.

LAURENCE: Lie you mean?

SAM: No, it's called, being kind.

Scene 3: Two days later.

Laurence's office. There is a knock on the door.

LAURENCE: (*Finishing a conversation on phone*) Yes, all right. Look I've got to go. Let's discuss this at the meeting. (*Bangs phone down*) I don't bloody believe it!

BELLA: (*Entering*) Oh, Mr Harper, Dennis asked me to let you know that he's changed the pink tasselled lampshade for a blue one; without tassels.

LAURENCE: Justin Peacock! They have got to be kidding. Only a board of idiots would employ Justin Peacock as our new Assistant Director. The only thing he can produce is a turd. I mean, have you seen his work?

BELLA: Um....No I ...don't think I have.

LAURENCE: Well, it makes 'coarse acting' look like high art. His production of 'One Crime Too Many' left me flailing for an oxygen mask! The paralysed Colonel had to rise like Lazarus to force open the door; and the doctor tried to cure the murder victim with a stethoscope! The final indignity was having to go round back and congratulate him and his lousy cast. I told him his production broke new boundaries and I'd never seen anything quite like it in my life. And he's such a moron that he clapped me chummily on the back and said he hoped, one day, to be up there where I once was.... Was!... Was!!... And now he's intending to begin his 'flight to greatness' under my protective wing!

BELLA: (*Beat*) I suppose the positive side of him becoming your assistant is that you have the power to direct his demise

LAURENCE: 'Direct his demise?!' Haven't you heard a word I've said? He's just directed the world's worst play and instead of finishing him off, the industry has recognised him as a 'new talent'. He's young, he's handsome and he's useless – the perfect combination!

Beat. Bella moves closer.

BELLA: I could help you finish him off – the new way.

LAURENCE: The new way? What on earth are you talking about?

Pause. Bella looks meaningfully at him. Laurence suddenly gets it.

LAURENCE: My God, you're not suggesting ...

BELLA: Yes, I am ... I'm an actor; I could make a very convincing case about his sexual advances. I'd do that. (*Looks at him*) For you.

LAURENCE: I don't want you to do that 'For me'! There's nothing worse than making a false accusation against an innocent man. It undermines the whole justice system. (*Beat*) And, anyway, he's gay.

Beat – then they both burst out laughing. Sam walks in smartly dressed.

LAURENCE: Ah, hello Sam, is it lunchtime already? Um, I don't think you two have met. Samantha this is Bella who's playing the maid in our next production.

BELLA: Nice to meet you Mrs. Harper.

They shake hands.

SAM: You must be the new actress Laurence has been telling me so much about.

BELLA: I suspect he's been moaning about my propensity for hiding behind lampshades and swallowing words.

SAM: Well ...

BELLA: I'm hoping Mr. Harper will make an actor of me yet. Although, to be honest, my secret ambition (*she makes eye contact with Laurence*) is to write plays. Working in rep is proving to be fertile ground!
She laughs.

SAM: I can just imagine. What kind of plays are you interested in? Not murder mysteries I hope!

BELLA: Oh no. They might appear to be perplexing but, in reality, they're predictable. The guilty party is either the one you first suspected, until their alibi distracted you, or the one you overlooked, like the police inspector.

SAM: (*Laughs politely*) I shall never get the killer wrong again! So, if not murder mysteries....?

BELLA: I want to write about how relationships change over the three ages and what holds them together.

LAURENCE: (*Sardonically*) Love?

SAM: (*Smiling at Laurence*) Friendship?

BELLA: Sex?

SAM: (*Laughs nervously*) Oh. Yes. Well, at our age you'd rather watch the final of Bake-Off than be handcuffed to the bed.

She laughs, alone. Pause. Laurence doesn't look pleased. Bella looks at Sam thoughtfully.

LAURENCE: Yes, well... Bella, perhaps you could go and tell Dennis that I'd like to start the second half at 2 o'clock.

BELLA: Yes, of course. Goodbye Mrs Harper. So lovely to have met you.

SAM: And you. Goodbye.

Bella exits.

LAURENCE: What the hell was that about? Are you trying to undermine me?

SAM: I'm sorry, it was a stupid thing to say. The way she looked at me turned my brains to mousse. She's so young and assured and I just felt like a dribbling crone in comparison.

LAURENCE: (*Pulls her to him*) For God's sake she's not half the woman you are. When she's your age her face will be bunched up like a cabbage. (*Beat*) And, what's more, she's horribly ruthless.

SAM: Why do you say that?

LAURENCE: Oh, never mind her just now. I've got bigger problems on my hands.

SAM: What's happened?

LAURENCE: The board, in their wisdom, have decided to appoint that toad, Justin Peacock, as my Assistant Director.

SAM: There won't be any difficulty if he's your assistant will there? I mean, as his boss you'll be able to keep him in line.

LAURENCE: That might not be so easy. His boyfriend is on the board of directors. It's bloody necrophilia.

SAM: I think you mean nepotism.

LAURENCE: What's more, as a sweetener, they've offered him the choice of the next play... which he can direct himself!

SAM: But, surely, you'll be required to oversee it?

LAURENCE: Wake up Sam; don't you see? I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if I don't. If it's a failure, they'll blame me for falling figures and bad reviews and if it's a success they'll use it as a pretext to get rid of me; citing some spurious phrase such as 'artistic differences.' And then bring in lover boy to do my job at a cheaper rate.

SAM: Aren't you being overly melodramatic?

LAURENCE: (*Darkly*) Perhaps I should take up Bella's suggestion.

SAM: What's that?

LAURENCE: Look the point is I've got to head off his appointment or I'm done for.

SAM: I don't know why you're so worried. You've only got a few years before you retire so, if the worst comes to the worst, you can go independent.

LAURENCE: 'Independent' is a euphemism for 'unemployed'.

He sits, miserably.

SAM: Oh, do stop feeling sorry for yourself.

LAURENCE: Hard to do when I'm saddled with dross plays, dross actors and dross standard lamps; and about to get saddled with someone as gifted as a pork pie.

SAM: I'm sorry to have to say this Laurence, but you are the author of your own misfortune. If you hadn't put on that absurdist play about a hole in the road, you wouldn't have been asked to step down, and we wouldn't be in this mess.

LAURENCE: I was trying to challenge mainstream audiences.

SAM: Audiences don't want to spend hours philosophising about potholes! And we never did find out what was down there.

LAURENCE: That was the whole idea. (*He laughs*)

SAM: Oh, don't be so facetious.

LAURENCE: Well, I became a failed director and you became an earth mother.

SAM: *You* played an active part in both.

LAURENCE: I would have stopped at one; the second was a surprise.

SAM: (*Beat*) You've always been down on Zoe.

LAURENCE: I'm not talking about Zoe. I'm talking about you giving up writing plays and taking up... kiddie-books.

SAM: They were never good enough for you were they?

LAURENCE: Well, you're not going to change the world writing about Teddy's trip to the stars are you?

SAM: 'Teddy's Journey to the Stars' was very successful.

LAURENCE: In monetary terms yes, but not artistically.

SAM: If paediatrics isn't a lesser form of medicine, why is writing for children a lesser form of literature?

LAURENCE: Because the former is sophisticated: the latter simplistic.

SAM: Books play a really important part in/children's development...

LAURENCE: Sam – for God's sake stop it! I fell in love with you; not your pen, all right.

SAM: Love is mutually exploitative Laurence. You believed in me and wanted a return on your investment.

LAURENCE: Oh, for goodness sake, why am I being tortured with all this psycho-babble, when you should be helping me get rid of the Peacock?

SAM: Try googling assassins! Or, better still, obliterate him with a lead pipe in the drawing room
She storms off.

Scene 4: That evening.

Laurence and Sams' kitchen. It is about midnight. Heather is sitting at the kitchen table. Each of the 'Omms' are delivered to a different tune.

HEATHER: *(Chants)* Ommmmm

I will not feel inferior Ommmmm

I've got a beautiful interior, Ommmmm

I will not dread uncertainty Ommmmm

I will embrace adversity.....OMMMMMMMmmmmmm

Towards the end her voice dies away in depression.

Laurence comes downstairs with no trousers on to get a nightcap. He is unpleasantly surprised to see Heather and he pulls his shirt down in an attempt to cover himself.

LAURENCE: Oh, uh, hello Heather. You're up late.

HEATHER: It's hard to sleep when your whole existence has been laid waste Laurence.

LAURENCE: Yes, yes, I'm sure it is.

HEATHER: I've been thrown adrift on the wreckage of my life.

LAURENCE: Yes, I see, um, very difficult. Yes. Uh.... Would you like a brandy?

HEATHER: My counsellor said I should avoid all depressants because... I'm depressed Laurence.

LAURENCE: Yes, yes. Very distressing..... I think I'll have one to fortify myself.

HEATHER: My counsellor says that my depression is a result of my abandonment issues.

LAURENCE: Abandonment issues?

HEATHER: That's when you're abandoned Laurence.... I've been abandoned by Richard.

LAURENCE: Oh yes, of course. Richard.

HEATHER: But my counsellor says it goes much, much deeper than that. The well of my abandonment issues stem from my childhood.

LAURENCE: *(Suddenly interested)* Oh, really? Who abandoned you as a child?

HEATHER: My hamster.

LAURENCE: Your... hamster... *(making an educated guess)* ran away did he?

HEATHER: No. He died.

LAURENCE: Ah... not his fault then.

HEATHER: Depends how you view it Laurence. When I returned to that little cage and found his four paws facing the sky *(she chokes back a sob)* I thought he had deliberately abandoned me. *(Pause while she tries to collect herself)* It was only later I learnt that I had overfed him and he'd died of... obesity! I killed him with kindness... *(she mournfully reflects)* but that knowledge didn't stop me feeling abandoned Laurence.

Pause.

LAURENCE: *(Gulps back drink)* I think I'll have another drink!

HEATHER: Then there was Percy.

LAURENCE: Your... *(he hazards a guess)* cat?

HEATHER: Gerbil.

LAURENCE: Ah, well, a sort of - collective rodent-abandonment!

He looks rather pleased with his analysis and has a drink on the strength of it.

HEATHER: *(Explaining as if to a child)* Hamsters and gerbils are God's children Laurence. *(Beat as Laurence nods obediently)* These traumatic incidents in my childhood have fuelled my abandonment issues with Richard.... Or Dick-Head as I now prefer to call him. *(Laurence looks at her with a new respect)* He, who was reluctant to pay £7 at the local barbers, now has a head full of waxed spikes costing one hundred and eighty! And, of course, a younger woman into the bargain. *(Beginning to break down)* I feel so... so...invisible. Oh Laurence. Do I seem invisible to you?

LAURENCE: No, no, of course not Heather. I haven't had enough to drink for that! *(He laughs)*

HEATHER: *(Moving towards him)* Do you find me attractive Laurence?

LAURENCE: *(Backing away)* Yes.....yes.

HEATHER: In what way Laurence?

LAURENCE: Oh, um, well, you, um, you.... You've got... nice eyes... and a nice.. shell suit.

HEATHER: Do you think so Laurence? Do you really think so? *(Laurence, remembering what Sam said to him about being kind, tries to nod convincingly)* My counsellor says I must concentrate on finding myself... *(Laurence nods sagely)* ...But where am I?

LAURENCE; In our... kitchen?

HEATHER: *(Advancing on him)* You wouldn't abandon me would you Laurence?

LAURENCE: No... no.

HEATHER: Don't abandon me Laurence *(She cries out)* Oh, please don't abandon me. *(She wails and squawks)* Please, please don't abandon me Laurence. *(She sobs inconsolably)*

LAURENCE: *(Running his hands helplessly through his hair)* Oh Good Lord! What have I done to deserve this? *(Taps her gingerly as if she were a wild animal)* Now, now Heather don't cry. There, there. *Sam, having heard the racket enters.*

SAM: *(Cradles Heather in her arms)* Oh, Heather, Heather, Shush, Shush... It's all right. Come on. Let's get you to bed. You'll feel better after a good night's sleep. I'll bring you up some cocoa.

She makes soothing noises as they exit. Laurence pours himself a large brandy and drinks it in one, then decides to take the bottle with him to bed.

LAURENCE: Please God. I'll be good from now on... only please, please let Heather abandon me.

He exits cuddling his brandy.

Scene 5: Lunchtime the next day.

Laurence and Sams' home.

SAM: Oh, that's wonderful Edward, I'm so happy for you both.

She gives him a cuddle. Laurence enters.

LAURENCE: Yes, uh, Congratulations. Just having a small bash are you? After all you've been living together for three years.

EDWARD: Huh, some hope. You know women, Dad, they want the full Megan Markle!

SAM: And why not? It's a day to remember.

LAURENCE: All I remember of ours is a piddled Auntie Lou falling headlong into the privet and having to pull her out by her canklles. I had backache for weeks.

SAM: Didn't stop you later though. *(Laughs)*

EDWARD: Ugh! Mum!

LAURENCE: So, er, what's this wedding going to cost?

EDWARD: Well, Carmen's done some figures and she thinks, if we keep the guest list down to seventy, and use the Royal Hotel instead of The Grand: what with cars; cakes;... flowers; photographers, and a flurry of frocks...we can get it down to about – thirty-six thousand.

LAURENCE: How much!!

EDWARD: She's absolutely determined to keep it below forty.

Laurence clutches his heart.

HEATHER: Don't do it Edward. Marriage is a doomed institution. You might end up abandoned like me.

EDWARD: Then I'd just find myself a younger woman.

Heather emits a pained groan. There is an awkward pause.

SAM: Yes, well, I know weddings are very expensive these days. *(Laughs)* I'm glad you're a boy. I pity her parents having to pay for all that. But your dad and I will help of course. Perhaps we could.... pay for the flowers?

LAURENCE: *(Relieved)* Oh yes, happy to pitch in; don't suppose a few gladioli will cost much.

EDWARD: Yeah, about that. You see, the days of the bride's parents paying for everything are over.

LAURENCE: *(Shocked)* You mean...you and Carmen are going to have to pay for it yourselves?

EDWARD: No Dad, that's not what I mean. I'm on a teacher's salary, Carmen's a junior doctor, and we're saving for our own place. Carmen and I thought the best solution would be, if both sides paid half for the wedding, and the present money went towards the honeymoon.

LAURENCE: Half? That's nearly... twenty thousand pounds.

EDWARD: Hopefully only eighteen.

LAURENCE: Only!

SAM: Laurence!!!..... *(To Edward)* We'd be happy to pay our half. Carmen's a lovely girl and we both want you to have your dream day.

HEATHER: *(Mournfully)* The dream will turn to ashes.

Zoe enters out of breath and in a state.

ZOE: Sorry I'm late. Biggles got into a fight with the cat next door, and got bitten on the bum.... and it turned into an abscess...so I had to take him to the vets on the way over here for a jab. But Biggles went psycho... and had to be controlled with a net.... and now he's trapped inside a lampshade giving me the death stare. And..... he's in the kitchen.

LAURENCE: Please tell me that evil moggy's not in our kitchen.

ZOE: Biggles is traumatised Dad.

LAURENCE: Could my day get any worse?

SAM: Well darling, I think it's wonderful that you've coped with all that, and still managed to make it over here. The table isn't booked 'til one, so we've got time for a celebratory drink.

ZOE: When I get to 55, I'm not sure I'll want to celebrate.

SAM: Thank you Zoe. I'm celebrating the fact I'm still alive! But we've also got something rather exciting to raise a glass to.Your brother's getting married.

ZOE: God! I hope you're not doing the whole church bit.

EDWARD: As a matter of fact we are, and we'd like you to be Matron of Honour.

ZOE: I refuse to bowl down the aisle wearing a pink marshmallow! Anyway, I thought they were the married ones, and as I haven't even got a partner.....

LAURENCE: Just as well. I couldn't afford two of the wretched things.

SAM: Laurence, give it a rest...we'll talk about this later. Take no notice of your dad, he's been having a few problems at work lately.

EDWARD: O.K.... but I think he could be happier for us.

LAURENCE: I'd be happy if it wasn't costing me 20 thousand.

EDWARD: 18 if you're lucky.

LAURENCE: Lucky!

SAM: Laurence, please, it's my birthday!

ZOE: How much?

EDWARD: We're hoping it will only cost 36 thousand, so dad's exaggerating. And he's only got to pay half, which makes his share eighteen

ZOE: Eighteen thousand? That's ridiculous! You've been living together for years. Why don't you just get hitched in your lunch break and celebrate at Nandos.

EDWARD: Ha Ha, very funny.

ZOE: No, I mean it. Why should mum and dad have to fork out all that money so Princess Carmen can prance around in a white meringue.

EDWARD: You've never liked her have you?

ZOE: No, I haven't. She's always looked down on me – Zoe with her sloppy clothes and her 2:2 in marketing.

SAM: That's enough, you two. Your dad and I are very happy about this marriage.

ZOE: Dad doesn't look very happy. And why should he? It's a gross amount to spend on just one day. And, as that money is coming out of the inheritance, I end up paying for it too.

SAM: We're not dead yet!

ZOE: No, but time is not on your side.

EDWARD: That's a rotten thing to say. Forget Matron of Honour. We'll have Carmen's sister instead.

ZOE: Ooh, I look forward to seeing that hippo in a pink tutu!

EDWARD: That's so fattist.

ZOE: A panda *needs* 40 pounds of food a day; she doesn't.

SAM: Please, stop it you two.

LAURENCE: I'm having a drink.

SAM: Laurence, you can't drink; you're supposed to be doing the driving. It's my birthday lunch and I'd like a couple of glasses.

LAURENCE: Cancel it. I'm going upstairs with my new best friend – a bottle of Bells. Then I'm going to count all the pennies in my jar and work out how long it'll take to pay for this bloody wedding if I save fivers instead.

He exits. Pause.

HEATHER: I don't want Laurence to feel abandoned. I think I'll go and have a long chat with him about his issues.

She exits chanting Ommm. Sam starts to cry. Edward puts an arm round her.

EDWARD: Oh Mum. *(to Zoe)* Now look what you've done.

ZOE: It's not me costing a thousand, trillion, million pounds.

EDWARD: Eighteen thousand.

ZOE: That's a fortune if you're on benefits.

EDWARD: Get a job then.

ZOE: It's not my fault they cut up rough about the web address for Hayes' Hit Festival.

EDWARD: That's because it read Hays Shit Festival!

Sam sobs.

ZOE: Don't cry mum. Your eye-bags'll get bigger.

EDWARD AND ZOE: *(Singing – Edward starts, Zoe joins in)* Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday Dear Mum. *(Edward sings 'Lovely Mum')* Happy Birthday to you.

They smile at her as if all should now be well. There is a pause, then Sam cries even louder. They look at each other in consternation.