

Return Trip

A Play in Three Acts

ALAN THORNHILL

and

HUGH STEADMAN WILLIAMS

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In gratitude to Frank Wilson
whose work of *Life for the World*
inspired this play

Characters

MADGE BARROW	housewife, mother and local Councillor
ERNEST BARROW	her husband, proprietor of small bookshop
GEOFFREY	their elder son
PAUL	their younger son
ROSE FURNESS	wife of local newspaper proprietor
CYNTHIA	her daughter
ELAINE	who helps in the shop

The action takes place in the living/dining room behind the Barrows' bookshop in the High Street of a small Northern town.

TIME: The Present

Act I	Sc.1	A morning in summer
	Sc.2	Afternoon, three weeks later
Act II		Afternoon, three weeks later
Act III	Sc.1	Evening, three weeks later
	Sc.2	Early the following morning

RETURN TRIP

A Play in Three Acts

SCENE *(The living-dining room in the home of Ernest and Madge Barrow in a small town in the North of England. It is a narrow Georgian house with tall windows. There are one or two nice pieces of furniture inherited from the past, but things are a bit run-down. There are plenty of books lying on chairs and tables. There is a door leading to the kitchen and the rest of the house. A door at the back is a swing door connecting the house with a bookshop on the main street.)*

ACT 1 SCENE 1

TIME The present. A morning in Summer.

(Madge Barrow appears alone in a spot. She is dressed for an occasion and wears a large, flowered hat. She is making a speech.)

MADGE Your Worship the Mayor, the Mayoress, and of course, Madam Chairman. It falls to my lot to propose a vote of thanks to our Member of Parliament, Mr. John Carpenter. We are honoured that he has come specially from his busy week in Westminster to be with us for the opening of our new Community Centre. *(At a loss)* Our new Community Centre. *(Consulting notes)* A Community without a centre is like an apple without a core.

VOICE Hear, Hear.

MADGE Thank you very much. And I know I can say without fear of contradiction that our dear Mr. Carpenter, has, in his remarks, fairly and squarely hit the nail on the head. Pause for laughter.

(During these remarks the light has been gradually broadening and we realise that Madge is not yet at the Opening, but is rehearsing her speech at the family breakfast table. On her right, the owner of the 'Voice' is her husband, Ernest, a scholarly, whimsical but disillusioned man who has long since given up the fight in life and sought refuge in books. On her left is Geoffrey, their elder son, a likeable, steady, ambitious young man who works on the local weekly newspaper. Both, in spite of some show of resistance and independence, let themselves be pushed around by Madge, talkative, quick, all-absorbing and down-to-earth.)

MADGE I said 'Pause for laughter'.

ERNEST Suppose there isn't any.

MADGE There certainly isn't much here.

- GEOFFREY That old joke's been made a thousand times before, Mum, didn't you know?
- MADGE Oh well, all the best jokes have been made before.
- ERNEST Besides it's so patently untrue. John Carpenter never hits the nail on the head, in Westminster or anywhere else.
- MADGE We got him in didn't we? So we'll have to make the best of a bad job. Don't you want to hear the rest of my speech?
- GEOFFREY I'd love to, Mum; if you'd just make a fresh cup of tea first. I've got to go to the office.
- MADGE Very well. Feed their faces. Their minds can wait. (*Going to kitchen.*) Bunch of Philistines! (*Head in door*) I could tell you liked the apple without a core bit. That'll make Rose Furness sit up and take notice.
- ERNEST (*Shouting*) It's good. Specially as it was I gave it to you.
- MADGE (*Off*) You never. It came to me clear out of the blue in the bath this morning.
- ERNEST I thought I heard a big splash.
- MADGE Oh well, wherever it came from, it's good. (*Returning with tea*) Rose wouldn't think up a thing like that in a month of Sundays, even though she is the Madam Chairman and all I get is a measly vote of thanks. What's she got that I haven't, except a rich husband? How d'you like my hat? Nobody's commented.
- GEOFFREY Words fail me. Cheer up, Mum, you may not have a rich husband, but you've got an up and coming son. And I must be up and going now. Just time for one more cup.
- MADGE By rights I ought to have two.
- GEOFFREY Cups of tea?
- MADGE Sons you goose. Two up and coming sons with a bit of gumption. You'll pass. Least said the better about t'other one.
- GEOFFREY Oh, don't go on about Paul again.
- ERNEST Aye, you've said plenty on that subject already, Mother.
- MADGE Things might have been better if you'd said more. You may know a lot about books, but you don't know much about life. Live and let live. That's your motto.
- ERNEST It's not such a bad one, at that.
- MADGE Live and let die was more like it. Sending him to that so-called University
- ERNEST You were the one pushed that.

- MADGE Of course I push. Where would anyone get in this family if I didn't push? Only trouble was I didn't push him to a place where I could keep a proper eye on him. *(To Geoffrey)* Talking of pushing, young man, when are you going to get around to popping the question? That young lady of your's isn't going to wait for ever you know. There's plenty more fish to fry in her pool, don't forget.
- GEOFFREY I don't want to be a fried fish in anybody's pool.
- MADGE You wouldn't mind being married to the Bosses' daughter, if you've any sense.
- GEOFFREY That doesn't come into it. I want to love her for herself, don't I?
- MADGE Who said you shouldn't? But when you get both love and money on the cards, I'd say 'Snap'.
- ERNEST If there's anything to be said on this subject, Mother, I'd let our Geoff say it in his own way and his own time.
- MADGE Well, of course. All the same, I can't wait to see Rose's face when she hears that my son has got hitched to her girl. You like her, don't you?
- GEOFFREY I'm pretty near daft about her, if you must know. What does she think of me, that's the point.
- MADGE Remember. Your Father and his Father before him were Somebodies in this town when Tom Furness was just a paper-boy. When she knows which side her bread's buttered, it won't melt in her mouth.
- ERNEST What?
- GEOFFREY To her I must look like a lump of cheap margarine.
- MADGE Never let me hear you talk like that, young man. You're steady, you're reliable and you're on the way up. You'll be up there at the top when some of those other fly-by-nights have bit the dust. Remember. Faint heart never won my fair lady.
- ERNEST Another bath-time original.
- GEOFFREY I wish you wouldn't go on so, Mother.
- MADGE Oh don't mind me. I just say what comes into my head. But for goodness sake, get on with it.
- GEOFFREY I'd better, or I'll be late at the office. And that won't help with Cynthia's old man.
- MADGE Hey, you haven't heard my speech yet.
- GEOFFREY Sorry. Didn't you know? The Press always leaves before the vote

GEOFFREY

(Contd) of thanks.

MADGE

You tell that boss of yours that Madge Barrow is expecting at least a paragraph, AND her face in the photograph.

(But with a slam of the front door Geoffrey is gone)

He's a good lad is our Geoff. He'll make it.

ERNEST

Make what exactly? *(He is opening a letter)*

MADGE

Progress, advancement, all the things you don't know much about.

ERNEST

You know enough of all that for both of us, Madge. You always have.

MADGE

Aye, it's lucky I do. *(Kissing the top of his head)* Sometimes I wonder why I ever married the likes of you.

ERNEST

(Humorously) I'll tell you why. You were tired of standing behind that dingy bar serving a lot of lads who couldn't afford a drink, let alone a tip. Along comes a handsome young chap.

MADGE

Go on with you.

ERNEST

Not on the dole. Decently dressed.

MADGE

You haven't changed your style from the day I first set eyes on you.

ERNEST

Elegant home off the High Street. Nice little business.

MADGE

And its the same nice little business after all these years.

ERNEST

And so you . . . what was it? You said 'Snap.'

MADGE

Couldn't take your eyes off me, you couldn't.

ERNEST

I'll admit, you were a fetching little thing.

MADGE

Well, I've grown since then, in more ways than one. And the book business hasn't. Do you wonder I encourage our Geoff to get on with it. Cynthia's the chance of a lifetime. Besides there's another reason.

ERNEST

What's that?

MADGE

Our Paul of course. You may bet your life he'll be back from that rehabilit—what—you—may—call—em one of these fine days.

ERNEST

I should sincerely hope so.

MADGE

But I'd as soon see our Geoffrey fixed up first. Don't forget Paul and young Cynthia were sweethearts at school, long before Geoff came into the picture.

ERNEST

I doubt if Geoff can forget that. That may be what's holding him back.

- MADGE It was puppylove and nowt else. Anyway Paul's made his bed and it's no use his crying over spilt milk.
- ERNEST Spilt milk in bed?
- MADGE Eh?
- ERNEST I don't quite follow the turn of phrase.
- MADGE Bed was part of his trouble. Can you follow that?
- ERNEST *(Looking at letter)* Anyway it seems our Paul's doing alright.
- MADGE You mean you've had a letter all this time? Why didn't you say so?
- ERNEST It isn't from Paul. It's from Mr. Carter. And seeing as how it's addressed to me, I thought I might have a read of it quiet like, before you get your hands on it.
- MADGE *(Snatching it)* Let's have it.
- ERNEST See what I mean.
- MADGE I never did care much for that Mr. Carter. What does he say? 'Paul's putting on weight, eats like a horse, does a hard day's work on the farm'.
- ERNEST Sounds alright to me. Taking a correspondence course in journalism too. They keep them busy.
- MADGE Idle hands make light work.
- ERNEST What?
- MADGE Just so long as he's turned over a new leaf.
- ERNEST And of course too many cooks don't make a summer.
- MADGE What are you talking about?
- ERNEST My dear, you're a golden treasury of mixed metaphors.
- MADGE Are we talking about our son, or the Oxford dictionary? I wish you thought as much about one, as you do about t'other.
- (During this Elaine Miles, a girl in her early twenties, dressed in old jeans and a shirt comes in from the bookshop)*
- ELAINE Shall I open the shop? It's past nine.
- ERNEST My goodness, so it is. Yes, please do that, Elaine. My wife and I have something to talk over. I'll be with you shortly.
- ELAINE Don't hurry. I doubt if most of our customers are out of bed yet. By the way, I thought we might alter the window display. Exams are over and vacation beginning. We might do Travel instead of Text books. What do you think?
- ERNEST Sounds like a good idea. Do you need help?

- ELAINE I don't think so. It's a pretty small window. *(Exit)*
- ERNEST She could run the shop single-handed, could Elaine.
- MADGE All the same, I don't like the way she comes sneaking in and out as though she owned the place. And do you mean to tell me you let an assistant serve in our shop looking like a scare-crow.
- ERNEST Oh come on Madge. She's in one kind of fancy dress. You're in another.
- MADGE So you think there's a comparison do you between something the cat's brought in, and a genuine Bébé original?
- ERNEST 'Bébé' alias Brenda Butterworth. Lives in Lark Lane. I remember her at school. She got a prize for sewing.
- MADGE Of course if you don't like it
- ERNEST Don't be silly. You're dressed for your public. Elaine's dressed for her's. Do you know that girl's bringing in a whole new clientele into our shop. All that college crowd. She speaks their language. They may look like Robinson Crusoe and Girl Friday, but you'd be surprised at the books they buy. You're always telling me to expand the business. Get with it.
- MADGE I should think pornography is all that would suit that lot.
- ERNEST Nonsense. They're studying everything from aero-dynamics to the Victorian novel.
- MADGE Well, I only hope she didn't hear us talking about Paul. If people were to find out, that'd be good-bye to my chances of being put up for Justice of the Peace. They don't want mothers of addicts on the bench.
- ERNEST Mothers of addicts might make the Bench a bit more understanding. Anyway according to Mr. Carter the problem's solved.
- MADGE Well of course. Our Paul has been a bit out of sorts, so we put him to work on a farm, get his appetite back. If the likes of Rose Furness were to suspect more than that, I'd die. You know she's on the local party Committee that recommends names for J.P. She was only saying the other day, right in my presence, that it's time we had some new blood on the bench.
- ERNEST Blood? On the Bench?
- MADGE Brain then. The present lot are practically ga—ga.
- ERNEST *(Who has managed to get hold of the letter again)* Whatever your story is about Paul, you'd better get it ready and water-tight. It looks as if we are to have him back soon.
- MADGE *(Snatching letter)* Why do you keep these things to yourself?

- MADGE
(*Contd*) '... trial period of three months . . . there is always an element of risk.' Risk of what? Far safer be with us than with those other drop-outs. It was the likes of them got him into trouble in the first place.
- ERNEST (*Leaning over her shoulder*) '... sure you will protect him as far as possible from old associations, and provide the soil where his new Christian life can grow and flourish.'
- MADGE What does he think we are? A bunch of heathen?
- ERNEST I've never claimed to be a believer.
- MADGE Don't I watch 'Stars on Sunday?' I never did think much of that Mr. Carter. D'you remember what he said when we first brought him our Paul? I told him they'd need to see he had clean underclothes every week, and he laughed and said, 'Oh, we try here to get cleaned up altogether.' He even asked you not to smoke on the premises.
- ERNEST It's one of their rules. No smoking or drinking.
- MADGE Of course you took it lying down but I spoke right up. 'You treat us as if we were the addicts.' I said.
- ERNEST And what did he say? 'We're most of us addicts one way or another.'
- MADGE The cheek. Yes. And when I told him we'd be back in a day or two to see how Paul was liking the place, he brings up another rule. 'No visitors for the first two months.' What do they think they're running there? Concentration camp?
- ERNEST Paul's coming home, that's the main thing.
- MADGE Aye, and we'll kill the fatted calf for him, quietly. Now then. Hear my speech again. Time's getting on. 'Your Worship the Mayor, the Mayoress, and of course Madam Chairman.' Though I'm blessed if I know what's 'of course' about it. 'It falls to my lot. . . .' That's a daft expression, if ever there was one. There was no lot about it.
- ERNEST No. It was wire-pulling of the first order. I suppose you could say 'The task has fallen on me.'
- MADGE Better still 'The honour has been bestowed on me of proposing a vote of thanks to our Member of Parliament for taking time off in the middle of his busy week in Westminster.' I doubt if he does a blooming thing down there. '... to be with us . . .'

(At this point Rose Furness, and her daughter Cynthia have come into the room through the bookshop. Rose, who has more money to spend, is even more outrageously dressed than Madge. These two carry on a perpetual feud-friendship. They really would be lost without the other to compete with. Cynthia is pretty and elegant,

spoilt, and, at the moment bored and sleepy.)

- MADGE *(Continuing)* . . . for the opening of our new Community Centre. 'It has been well said.' Do you like that? . . . 'A Community without a centre is no better than an apple without a core.' Hello Rose. Good morning, Cynthia dear.
- ROSE Where did you get that from, Madge Barrow? You've taken that apple quote clean out of my mouth.
- MADGE I'm surprised if that apple came from your mouth, Rose Furness. Seeing as I only created that figure of speech in the bath this morning.
- ROSE Well, you can wash that apple right down the plug hole. It's mine, and I'm speaking first. 'It has been well said' indeed. By me, I'd have you know.
- CYNTHIA O Mother, don't get so worked up. It isn't so well said as all that.
- ERNEST I think I can solve the mystery. I found those words in a book on local Government, and I must have absentmindedly given them to both of you.
- MADGE Just like Ernest. No sense of family loyalty. Please keep the quotation, Rose dear. Its a bit too fanciful for me. More your style.
- ROSE No really. You have it. My speech is quite closely packed already.
- MADGE I'm sure it would be. And knowing how some speakers go on and on. Our Member I mean. By the time it comes to me, people will be more in a mood for eats than for a vote of thanks. That's a lovely hat, my dear, and your Cynthia is just a picture as always.
- CYNTHIA Thank you. Yes I got this in a little boutique off Sloane Street. *(yawns)*
- MADGE You'll be swallowing flies, dear, if you open your mouth as wide as that.
- CYNTHIA Sorry. I only just got up.
- ROSE Our Cynthia always goes to London for her clothes, don't you dear? By the way, would you like a lift? We've brought the Rover. Not having a car yourself I mean. You might help me arrange this tassel Mr. Carpenter's supposed to pull when he unveils the Memorial plaque, you know with the names of the various benefactors. Tom says he'd much rather we remain anonymous. But you have to face it. Names make news.
- MADGE I'm sure yours will, my dear.
- ROSE Talking of names and news, how's your Paul keeping? We seem to hear so little of him these days.
- MADGE You know how our Paul is. Always restless. Never in one place long.

- CYNTHIA He hasn't written a line for more than a year. We used to write to each other all the time.
- MADGE (*Vaguely*) O well. With Paul, first it's one thing, then it's another. Now our Geoffrey is just the opposite. Steady as a rock. You can rely on him. And let me tell you, that young man is going places.
- ROSE Tom is glad to have him on the Sentinel.
- MADGE Oh, he won't be on the Sentinel for ever. That boy's got his eyes fixed on London. The big Dailies. But shy! Well *shy's* not the word for it. If you could hear some of the brilliant things he comes out with here at home with his Ma and Pa. But with outsiders he's just tongue-tied. He's like his Father you know. Can't come to the point.
- ERNEST Some points are best stayed away from, Mother.
- MADGE When Ernest first started walking out with me, I knew of course where he was heading long before he did. But could he bring himself to pop the question? In the end I had to pretty well pop it for him.
- ERNEST And you've been popping ever since, my love. Well, you'll excuse me but I must be getting on to the shop.
- ROSE I've noticed some strange looking customers in and out of your shop lately. I hope they're not giving the place a bad name.
- ERNEST I don't care so much about names, so long as they buy books.
- ROSE I don't know what our town's coming to. You really wonder if it's safe to walk about the streets at night. Now they say someone wants to open up some kind of a club for drug addicts. Do you realise what that would mean? Every sort of hoodlum, and what have you roaming the streets, behaving like animals, coshing respectable people over the head so as to get another fix. Tom's going to take the whole matter up in the Paper, and we'll get up a petition about it.
- CYNTHIA These people have to go somewhere, Mother. Isn't the club supposed to help them?
- ROSE If people like that want help, let them go somewhere else for it, I say. This town's got a reputation for decency and order, and some of us mean to keep it, don't you agree, Madge dear.
- MADGE I think we'd better be going, hadn't we? You want that tassel of yours to hang right.
- CYNTHIA Yes do let's go Mother. I can't wait to get the whole thing over with. Good-bye Mr. Barrow. Pity you can't come with us.
- ERNEST I think I'll stick to books. You can shut them up when you've had

- ERNEST
(Contd) enough of them.
- CYNTHIA Give my love to Paul when you write. I don't even have his address.
- MADGE Oh, he's just on a farm getting his health back.
- ROSE He did have a poor spell, I remember. Had to leave University. Such a pity.
- CYNTHIA He was mad keen on his studies.
- MADGE Oh well, he's been travelling a good deal. You know broadening his outlook.
- CYNTHIA But I don't see why that means forgetting his old friends.
- MADGE You know how it is. He has masses of friends. Girl friends, too, I'll be bound. You never could tie that lad down. Now Geoffrey, he's different.
- ERNEST Hadn't you better be going? Musn't keep the Rover waiting.
- ROSE That's alright. Tom's lending us one of the Sentinel drivers to act as chauffeur, seeing as it's a special occasion. Besides the parking's getting simply terrible.
- MADGE That's why we always prefer to walk. Geoffrey is always nagging us to get a car. Of course he'll soon have one of his own. Nice little sports car, you know, a two seater.
- CYNTHIA Oh that would be fun. I'm dying to learn to drive. Daddy won't let me learn on ours.
- MADGE Our Geoffrey's a beautiful driver. I'm sure he'd be happy to teach you.
- ROSE Come along you two. You don't want to miss the Chairman's remarks.
- MADGE Oh no, we don't want to miss them, do we?
(They go in a flurry leaving Ernest alone. With a contented sigh he picks up a book and pours himself another cup)
(Enter Elaine)
- ELAINE Sorry to interrupt, but there's that fellow again asking if you've managed to get him that early edition of Tristram Shandy. You said you'd try some of the second-hand shops.
- ERNEST Tell you the truth, I did get it. Had it a fortnight. You know it's years since I read Tristram Shandy. It's good stuff. Lovely edition too. Look.
- ELAINE You could charge him plenty.
- ERNEST Yes, but tell him it's not available for at least another eighty pages.

ELAINE I don't believe you're really interested in selling books. You just like having them around.

ERNEST Better say its unavailable altogether. I've got a son coming home soon and I think he might like it.

ELAINE So you've got another son?

ERNEST Oh yes. He's the bright one of the family. Devours books. Loves writing. He'll be helping a bit in the shop I daresay.

ELAINE Sounds good. We ought to get on alright.

ERNEST (*Preoccupied in the book*) What's that? Yes. I think you will.

CURTAIN

ACT 1 SCENE 2

(Three weeks later. Afternoon. Madge is pinning a garishly painted sign 'Welcome Paul' over the mantelpiece. Ernest is fussing around with a pile of books. Both are tense and excited and trying not to show it. The radio is going with strident music.)

- ERNEST Do you really like that? *(Pointing to sign)*
- MADGE What's wrong with it?
- ERNEST It isn't what you'd call a work of art.
- MADGE It's his home he's coming to. Home. Not Municipal Art Gallery.
- ERNEST Anyway, I thought we agreed we were going to 'play it cool'. I think that's the expression. Act normal and natural like.
- MADGE Well, of course. But when a long lost son walks into the house, you don't just say 'Good afternoon' and go on with the dusting.
- ERNEST At least you switch off the radio. *(Switches off)*. It's getting on my nerves. Of course our Paul loves classical music. I thought we might have something playing on the gramophone when he walks in. I wondered about the Brahms Piano Concerto in B flat.
- MADGE That'd really 'Be flat' alright. Ha ha. What other fancy ideas have you got in your head? Do you want to draw the curtains, burn incense? I bet he'd much rather have fish and chips and watch 'Top of the Pops' I don't know why you've been messing around with those dusty old books all afternoon.
- ERNEST I want them for his room. That's the first thing that lad will look at, the books in his room. I'm making a selection. 'Confessions of an English opium eater.' Perhaps that's a bit obvious.
- MADGE Keep off the subject, can't you. Open your mouth and you're sure to get off on the wrong foot.
- ERNEST He might like to compare notes with de Quincey. 'Return of the Native.' Still a bit close to the bone. 'Crimes of Passion.' That should be safe enough.
- MADGE Oh simmer down. And you're telling me to keep cool.
- ERNEST Don't forget. You poured custard over our sausages at dinner.
- MADGE And you went on eating them till I pointed it out. How about drinks to celebrate?
- ERNEST Better be careful. You know. One thing leads to another.
- MADGE There you are, harping on the subject again.
- ERNEST We've got to look facts in the face, haven't we?
- MADGE You never look anything in the face. You won't even wear your

- MADGE
(Contd) bi-focals.
- ERNEST Have you ever tried wearing bi-focals in a book-shop?
- MADGE Don't forget, Mr. Carter's bringing our Paul.
- ERNEST Well, he won't be able to stop me smoking here. But it's good of him all the same. Pretty near a hundred mile drive. Ah! I remember the book I had in mind. Tristram Shandy. *(Searching on his knees)* I had it here. I told Elaine not to sell it.
- MADGE *(On her knees)* I'm getting out drinks. This calls for a toast, and Mr. Carter can ruddy well lump it.
- ERNEST *(On his knees searching among the books)* Damn that girl. I bet she's gone and let it go.
- MADGE Where's that Coronation special we've kept for a rainy day?
(Each is on his knees, absorbed in his quest when Paul quietly walks into the room. He is shy but deeply happy. Neatly dressed with a raincoat over his arm and an old suitcase.)
(He stands for a moment in complete silence watching them. Then he kneels too. He takes a bottle that Madge is extracting from the cupboard. Madge sits up with a start.)
- MADGE *(Struggling to her feet)* Paul! I never saw you come in.
- PAUL *(Getting up)* I didn't know if it was private like, or if anyone could join in.
- MADGE Join in what?
- PAUL You looked as if you were praying.
- MADGE Don't be silly. Why should we be praying? Nobody's dying. *(She hugs him)* Paul. Darling boy.
- PAUL Hello Mum. It's good to see you.
- MADGE Oh my dear. Well I never.
- ERNEST Don't smother him now. I want to look at him.
- PAUL Hello Dad. *(They awkwardly shake hands)* Well. How do I look?
- MADGE Just the same. Just our old Paul.
- ERNEST Slightly better, I'd say.
- PAUL I should hope so.
- ERNEST You've put on weight.
- PAUL My, it's good to be back. 'Welcome Paul'. Thanks a lot.
- MADGE See what I mean. Better than your old Brawns.

- ERNEST Brahms, Mother, Brahms.
- PAUL Dad correcting Mum! Mum chivying Dad! Now I'm really home.
- MADGE Where's your Mr. Carter?
- PAUL He dropped me off at the corner. He thought I'd like to walk the last bit myself. He shook hands and said 'Alright, lad. Now you're on your own.' You don't know what that meant to me.
- MADGE 'On your own.' What a cheek! After all, we are your Mum and Dad.
- PAUL I can't describe what it was like walking down the street. You know the house with the broken pavings. And the one where that crazy old woman lived, with all those cats. We were scared stiff of her when we were kids.
- ERNEST She's dead now.
- MADGE So, I'm glad to say, are the cats.
- PAUL Then there's the phone box, where I used to spend hours and hours, when you wouldn't let me tie up the phone here.
- ERNEST You always were fond of the phone.
- PAUL Funny, I could express myself better when I couldn't see the person I was talking to. You know I'm beginning to look people in the eyes now. It's amazing. I'm not ashamed any more. I feel forgiven.
- ERNEST That's alright, son, you were led astray. There's nothing to forgive.
- PAUL Oh but there is Dad. There's everything. I never began to be free until I said 'It's my fault.' And meant it. Up to then it was always, oh you know, society, the pushers, the Establishment, you and Mum, even God was to blame, for making me the way I was. But look, I didn't mean to start on all this. How's everybody? How's Geoff?
- ERNEST He'll be coming along soon. He's in Mr. Furness' office now.
- PAUL Wonderful. I can't wait to see him. How are the Furnesses? Do you and Rose scrap as hard as ever, Mum?
- MADGE Rose Furness and I never scrap, as you call it. We've had our differences, I admit. But now Rose is helping put your Mother up for J.P. What do you think of that?
- PAUL Great! (*Shyly*) And what about Cynthia? Haven't heard of her for ages.
- ERNEST Oh, I wouldn't be surprised if Cynthia is along here too one of these days.
(*Madge looks daggers at him*)
- PAUL Really! That's super. You mean to say she remembers me. After all

- PAUL
(*Contd*) that's happened. She was the one I used to natter with on the phone for hours on end. Coin after coin. No wonder I was always broke.
- MADGE Our Geoff's saved up and bought a car. Just got it.
- ERNEST Only an ancient V.W. But she goes occasionally.
- MADGE Geoff'll make anything go. A born mechanic.
- PAUL I've been driving a tractor. But I'm still all thumbs when it comes to practical things.
- ERNEST How's the writing, son?
- PAUL It's coming back gradually. For ages I couldn't put three words together. Couldn't think consecutively. Mr. Carter thinks I might be able to make a go of it. He'd like me to write my whole story, how I got into drugs, and how I've got out.
- MADGE Oh, I wouldn't do that.
- PAUL He thinks that way I could help other people.
- MADGE Why dwell on the past?
- PAUL The wonderful thing is, God has blotted out the past.
- MADGE God?
- PAUL All the shame, all the blame. So now I can use the past to help other people. That's what I want to do more than anything else in the world.
- MADGE Yes, well you'll have to consider other people too, won't you. And make sure you don't let your past spoil their future.
- ERNEST Your's you mean.
- MADGE (*Ignoring this*) You haven't even hung your coat up yet, have you?
- PAUL Thanks, Mum.
- MADGE And don't you want to go to your room?
- PAUL Oh alright.
- ERNEST I expect you haven't quite forgotten the way.
- PAUL I'll just take this up, and I'll be down again in a minute.
- MADGE And I'll make us a cup of tea. We could do with it. (*Exit*)
- ERNEST Oh Paul. I meant to choose some books for your room. Something you'd specially like. But I never quite got round to it.
- PAUL Thanks, Dad. I'd like to pick them out with you. Perhaps I can help a bit in the shop.
- ERNEST Sure you can manage that bag. Yes. That would be fine, having you in the shop again.

- PAUL I just can't believe I'm home. (*Exit*) I'll be down in a minute, Mum.
- MADGE (*Entering*) Well, I must say. So God has blotted out the past, has He? Its all right embarrassing. And just when I'm being put up for J.P. too.
- ERNEST Give the lad a chance, Madge. He's a bit overwrought. It's all still strange.
- MADGE Aye, well, it's not us that's strange.
- ERNEST So long as he's cured, and happy, I don't see as how we need grumble about how it's happened.
- MADGE Just so long as he doesn't go about, brandishing his past like a flaming sword, dropping bricks all over the shop.
- ERNEST Dropping bricks in a shop with a flaming sword?
- MADGE Oh go on with you. You can't understand plain English. What I mean is, religious enthusiasm's a dangerous thing, especially when other people's careers are at stake.
- ERNEST Do you remember how he was when we saw him that day in hospital, pouring with sweat, screaming for help, more like an animal than a boy. And look at him now, not much more than a year after. If I believed in miracles, which I don't, I think I'd have to call this one.
- MADGE Well, watch what you say to him. There was no need for you to bring up Cynthia and her maybe coming here, like that. Remember, don't count your chickens before they cross the road.
- ERNEST Let me try and figure that out. Where exactly were these chickens...?
- MADGE Oh you! You'd let the grass grow under your own nose. If only our Geoff had listened to me and got a move on with that girl. Now anything could happen. (*Paul returns*) O my. Here you are. Can hardly get used to your being in the house again. Did you find the clean towel I put out for you?
- PAUL Thanks Mum. I can hardly believe it. My old room looking just the same. A bit smaller.
- ERNEST (*Another blunder*) I expect it seems so after institutions, hospital wards and all that.
- MADGE Stop harping, can't you?
- PAUL All my old things. Even the School photographs. And thanks for the flowers, Mum.
- MADGE I must say you never used to notice things like that.
- PAUL I don't think I used to notice anything, or anyone, not properly. I lived in such a small world of my own. You don't know what it means to breathe again, actually to see things like flowers and streets and houses and people, to feel they all belong somehow,

- PAUL
(Contd) they all matter.
- MADGE Now here's your tea. That's what matters now.
- PAUL Sorry, Mum. Mr. Carter warned me about talking too much. Do you know in the centre, for the first month, I hardly ever spoke more than a couple of words at a time. I was so closed up.
- MADGE Well, you're making up for it now I can see that. It's alright here at home. We understand. Just be careful with outsiders. Remember, they don't want to be bothered with the seamy side.
- PAUL I'll remember, I promise. I don't want to thrust myself on anyone.
- ERNEST Don't worry, lad, just take things as they come.
(Enter Geoffrey and Cynthia. They are flushed and excited. She is wearing a corsage.)
- GEOFFREY Hello, everyone. Guess what.
- MADGE Geoffrey! . . . Do you mean to say you've gone and done it.
- CYNTHIA *(Going to him)* Paul. I can't believe it. Is it really you?
- PAUL Hello Cynthia. Hello Geoff. Wow, I never expected a welcome like this. All dolled up too. I thought you'd forgotten all about me.
- GEOFFREY Good to see you, lad. Welcome home.
- CYNTHIA *(To Geoffrey)* But why didn't you tell me Paul was coming home?
- GEOFFREY I meant to of course. But other things drove it clean out of my head. Meet the latest member of the family.
- ERNEST But she already knows our Paul.
- GEOFFREY I don't mean our Paul. I mean our Cynthia. She's said Yes. Haven't you, love?
- MADGE Geoffrey. Come and give me a kiss. You've done it at last. And Cynthia. I must have a kiss from you too.
- ERNEST Welcome to the family.
- MADGE You've been a long time coming, but you're here.
- PAUL Congratulations. For a moment I thought you'd come to meet me.
- CYNTHIA I thought you'd gone and left us all for good. Where have you been?
- PAUL Didn't you know? Didn't they tell you, I . . .
- MADGE *(Watchful)* That's too long a story for now. We've got to celebrate. Ernest. You do the necessary. I'll fetch glasses.
- GEOFFREY That's right. It's a double celebration.

- PAUL All the best, Geoff. I'm really glad for you.
- GEOFFREY Thanks, lad. No hard feelings, I hope, or anything like that.
- MADGE (*With glasses*) I should think not indeed. This is just the cherry on the cake.
- PAUL (*Shyly*) I'm really glad for you. You've got a wonderful girl.
- CYNTHIA Do you really mean it?
- PAUL Of course I do. You know that.
- CYNTHIA Well, never having heard a word from you all these months, I wasn't so sure.
- MADGE Come on Ernest. Fill up the glasses.
- ERNEST Give me a chance. Give me a chance.
- PAUL Do you mind, Dad. I don't think I'll have any.
- ERNEST Just as you say, son.
- MADGE Nonsense. Don't you want to drink your brother's health?
- PAUL Of course I do. But I'm off all that.
- MADGE Oh, come on. You're not under that Mr. Carter's thumb any longer, you know.
- PAUL It isn't that.
- MADGE What is it then? Are you scared? It won't bite you.
- ERNEST Leave the boy be, Mother.
- MADGE Alright. Alright. But I'd have thought today of all days, he'd want to be one of the family. This is the first engagement in this house since you brought me home to meet your old Dad.
- ERNEST And a considerable shock it was to him.
- MADGE Didn't think I was good enough. I soon showed him.
- ERNEST (*Clearing throat*) Well, everybody, there isn't much to be said . . .
- MADGE Then don't say it. No need for a speech. We've been expecting it, you know. Our Geoff's had his eye on you, Cynthia love, ever since I don't know when.
- ERNEST (*Putting his foot in again*) Ever since Paul left home.
- MADGE (*Cross*) I said there's no need for a speech, Dad.
- CYNTHIA You seem to have known more about all this than I have.
- MADGE Oh, there's few secrets in our family.
- CYNTHIA Paul's certainly been one of them.

- MADGE How did our Geoff pluck up nerve to pop the question, that's what beats me. Go on. Tell us everything.
- CYNTHIA He was giving me a driving lesson, and I was grinding the gears like mad. You know how it is. And Geoffrey kept on saying 'Relax. Don't rush it. Let it mesh.'
- GEOFFREY And then it struck me all of a sudden. Why don't we two let it mesh? And before I knew what I'd said I . . . well, you know what I mean.
- MADGE I wonder you weren't both in the ditch.
- CYNTHIA We nearly were. I was scared stiff. So I just jammed on the brakes, took a deep breath, and said 'Yes'. Just like that.
- GEOFFREY Just like that.
- ERNEST He took a mean advantage if you ask me. Well, however it happened, I give you a toast. 'The lucky pair.'
- ALL The lucky pair.
- PAUL I just hope you're very happy. I'm sure you will be.
- CYNTHIA And here's to Paul. Thanks for coming back just in time.
- GEOFFREY If it had been sooner, there might have been some hot competition. How about another toast? 'To Paul. My long-lost brother.'
- ALL To our Paul!
- GEOFFREY And if I can be any use, helping you settle down, find a job, you know, no questions asked. I might pull a few strings.
- PAUL Thanks. I'll make out. Well, I knew it was going to be quite a day.
- MADGE But you didn't know the half of it, eh? Well, I'll say this. Our Geoff knows a good thing when he sees one. With Cynthia to back him there'll be no stopping him now.
- (Enter Elaine from shop)*
- ELAINE Excuse me butting in. But it's about closing time and I . . .
(Breaking off) Hello Paul. It's you. Well, I never.
- PAUL *(Shaken)* Hello Elaine. Yes. It's me.

CURTAIN

ACT II

(Three weeks later. Afternoon. Paul is alone, sitting at a desk, typing the last words of an article. Enter Elaine from the shop)

- ELAINE Would you care for a cup of tea? I'm making one for your Dad.
- PAUL Thanks. I wouldn't mind.
- ELAINE You've been busy all afternoon.
- PAUL That's right.
- ELAINE We've been busy too. Doing inventory. The kettle's boiling. *(She goes into the kitchen. Paul gathers up his papers)* Here we are. I'll give Mr. Barrow a cup, then I'll come and drink one with you. I deserve a break.
- PAUL Just as you say. *(He completes his article as she goes into the shop. She comes back.)*
- ELAINE Sugar?
- PAUL Yes, please.
- ELAINE Here you are.
- PAUL Thanks. *(He moves away)*
- ELAINE You aren't very communicative.
- PAUL Why did you come here?
- ELAINE It's a free country.
- PAUL Don't tell me it was coincidence.
- ELAINE What?
- PAUL You being in this town, in this shop just as I returned. You knew, didn't you?
- ELAINE Of course.
- PAUL And yet you never told my father.
- ELAINE What, for heaven's sake?
- PAUL That you knew the name Barrow. That you knew his son.
- ELAINE That we lived together? That you introduced me to drugs? That would have been a great testimonial to my qualifications, wouldn't it?
- PAUL Why did you want this particular job?
- ELAINE I like books. I like your Dad. He's a nice, good, tolerant man.
- PAUL He's a blind fool.
- ELAINE Tut. Tut. That's no way to speak of your father.
- PAUL So tolerant, and so blind, that he's letting you make his business a

- PAUL
(*Contd*) hang out for half the addicts in town.
- ELAINE Don't be silly. You've still got addiction on the brain.
- PAUL Haven't you?
- ELAINE To some extent. Thanks to you, don't forget. But don't worry. I'm not as messed up as you were. I can keep it together.
- PAUL I thought I could – at first.
- ELAINE It was fun, wasn't it? Admit it.
- PAUL Yes, it was – to start with.
- ELAINE Drugs are like marriage. Fun to start with, until you wake up and realise you're hooked. Only you see I'm smart. I don't believe in marriage, or in being hooked.
- PAUL I know I'm responsible for what's happened to you. I've wept a lot of tears thinking about that.
- ELAINE Spare your tears. I don't shed them any more.
- PAUL Look Elaine. I've tried two ways of life. Our old way and a new way. You've only tried one.
- ELAINE Don't forget. I was a more or less innocent little school girl, not even in college, when I came across you and your friends.
- PAUL (*Troubled*) Do you think I'm likely to forget?
- ELAINE You all seemed terribly sophisticated and clever, very free and daring to my young mind. And I was just crazy for kicks.
- PAUL And I was shy and closed up, longing somehow to break out of myself. But since then I've found everything I was fool enough to look for in drugs. All the liberation and enlargement of vision, plus more besides.
- ELAINE I've been watching you since you got back. Something's happened. I'll admit that.
- PAUL It has. It's set me free. I'm not scared any more. Try it, Elaine. Look, I helped get you on the wrong track once. I'd give anything if I could help you onto the right one now.
- ELAINE I don't think I'd bother. Maybe you'd better keep away from me. I'm not good for you.
- ERNEST (*Voice off*) Elaine. Can you come a minute?
- ELAINE You see. I've got to go.
- ERNEST (*Looking in*) I don't want to interrupt anything. But there's a young man come in. He seems to be looking for something, he doesn't quite know what. He thinks you can help him.

- ELAINE Half of them don't know what they're looking for. I'll do what I can, Mr. Barrow. Sorry to have been so long over tea.
- ERNEST Not at all (*Elaine goes*) Fancy your knowing one another in your college days, and never realising it until you actually saw one another again.
- PAUL Elaine did realise it. That's why she came here in the first place. That's why she applied for the job with you.
- ERNEST Well, I can understand. Renew an old acquaintance.
- PAUL Dad, you don't understand. We took drugs together. We lived together.
- ERNEST I'm very sorry to hear that. To me, brought up in the way I was – a comfortable home – a protected life – it seems so messy. So miserable. I suppose it's all part of the way young people feel they must rebel against the hypocrisy of my generation. It will pass, I'm sure, just as it has with you.
- PAUL It didn't just pass, Father. I needed to be changed – radically.
- ERNEST I know, I know. And don't mistake me. I'm terribly glad for what you've found. For me though it's all a little too dogmatic, too presumptuous. 'I'm changed.' Surely we're all changing, all the time. We're all grasping hold of some small element of truth, of reality, and trying imperfectly I admit, to make it our own.
- PAUL Oh Father. Stop blathering. Honestly. While you are grasping onto something or other, Elaine is turning your shop into a meeting place for a dope ring.
- ERNEST That's ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. I know these people, I talk with them. They come here to look at books. They are highly intelligent and thoughtful, much more interested in the world and in the pursuit of ideals than ever I was at their age. I want to understand them, and help them. If some of them are in trouble in the same sort of way that you were, am I supposed to turn them away from a public place of business? That, if I may say so, Paul is my quarrel with your sort of outlook on life. You so quickly become holier than thou.
- PAUL I'm not holier than anyone. It's just that God has come into my life, and done something for me that I could never have done in a month of Sundays for myself, by going to bookshops, mingling with addicts, and talking to nice, kind, ineffective people like you.
- ERNEST Now, there's no need to be offensive Paul.
- PAUL I'm sorry. I've no business to talk like this. You're a far better man than I am. If only you could just open your eyes and see what's

PAUL
(Contd) going on right under your nose. Evil is a fact, Dad. It's a force. It's planned. Intended. Organised. You'll never meet it or conquer it with little poultices of good will and tolerance, with some kind of intellectual or spiritual aspirin. It needs surgery.

ERNEST I daresay that's true. But, if I may say so, you may still be a little young, unqualified, even brash, to play the role of a moral and spiritual surgeon. After all there are highly trained psychiatric, social, even spiritual experts who have devoted years of research to dealing with some of these problems.

PAUL Not one of these so-called experts was able to help me. They tried. My God, how they tried! In the hospital. Social workers galore, doctors. I've lain down on couches and poured out my frustrations and neuroses till I was ready for the loonybin. It didn't do the trick.

ERNEST And what did do the trick?

PAUL Something terribly simple, and impossibly difficult. Love. I met people who cared for me, even when I was rude, filthy, ungrateful and repulsive. And they went on caring, on and on, without asking for anything in return. They didn't talk much about God. Not to start with they didn't. They just showed me what He was like. And it wasn't anything sentimental either. I never felt they were sorry for me. They never suggested it was somebody else's fault. They held me firm as steel to the things which deep in me I knew to be true. There is right and there is wrong. There is loving people and there is hurting people. There is slavery and there is freedom. There is filth and there is clarity and cleanness. There is life and there is death, and you can choose. To refuse to choose is to choose death.

(Enter Cynthia carrying a lot of parcels. She is worried and pre-occupied)

CYNTHIA Sorry to butt in, but is Geoffrey back yet?

ERNEST Hello, Cynthia, my dear. Your Father's a stickler for office hours. I doubt if Geoffrey will be early. It's only five. Stay and have a cup of tea.

CYNTHIA No thanks. I don't want tea. I just need to see Geoffrey. It's a bit urgent.

ERNEST You could ring the Sentinel. I expect he's still there.

CYNTHIA Oh, I think I'd better wait. I want to talk to him privately.

ERNEST That's right. I don't suppose he'll be long. You stay and keep Paul company. Make yourself at home. I must go and help Elaine finish this inventory. Sure you won't have tea?

- CYNTHIA No thanks, really. And I don't want to interrupt Paul.
- PAUL You won't interrupt anything. I've just finished writing an article.
- CYNTHIA Is it for a newspaper?
- PAUL I'd like it to be.
- ERNEST Well, I'll leave you two to it. You came just at the right time.
(Exit)
- CYNTHIA I didn't know you wrote for the newspapers.
- PAUL It's pretty much of a first attempt.
- CYNTHIA 'Return Trip'. Sounds interesting.
- PAUL It is.
- CYNTHIA May I?
- PAUL Of course.
- CYNTHIA (Reading) 'A man can walk on the moon, and return to earth alive. Can a man walk in the depths of hell, and return, not just alive, but with a new life? I believe he can. Because it has happened to me.'
This is quite a story.
- PAUL I'm not sure you ought to be reading it.
- CYNTHIA Sorry. If it's meant for the press, it doesn't seem exactly private.
- PAUL I was thinking I might show it to your Father. But if he takes it, it'd probably have to be anonymous. Just somebody's experience.
- CYNTHIA (Still reading) A true story?
- PAUL A true story.
- CYNTHIA Yours?
- PAUL Mine.
- CYNTHIA So this is the great mystery. The strange disappearance of Paul Barrow sunk without trace. Not a word. Not even a postcard. Not even to someone who thought for some reason that she was a friend. Why the hell didn't you let on?
- PAUL I'm terribly sorry, Cynthia. It wasn't because I didn't care. It was because I did. I just didn't feel like dumping a cartload of garbage on top of a beautiful friendship.
- CYNTHIA Was it so beautiful?
- PAUL Not to you I daresay. To me, well, it was a first romance, I suppose. All terribly schoolboyish and sentimental. You know how shy I was, how hard I found it to be natural with people. You were the great exception. I put you on a great, big, pink cloud. This all must sound pretty pathetic.

- CYNTHIA You couldn't have thought much of me if you couldn't tell me the truth.
- PAUL It was all such a mess, I couldn't tell anybody about anything. Then later, when I could have written, when I wanted to write, there was Mum.
- CYNTHIA What about your Mum?
- PAUL She was scared stiff the news would get out of what I've been. She still is.
- CYNTHIA Keeping up with the Joneses.
- PAUL Or the Furnesses.
- CYNTHIA Well, yes, my Mother would blow a few gaskets. She doesn't take kindly to juvenile delinquency.
- PAUL Do you?
- CYNTHIA Not particularly. All the same, I like to stick by my friends. Besides this story seems to have a happy ending.
- PAUL That's the point. This isn't a lurid confession, 'My Sin' and all that guff. It's the story of a cure, more than a cure actually. A whole new life.
- CYNTHIA Why make it anonymous then?
- PAUL I've thought a lot about that. I'd like to blazon it to the world, with my name on top of it. I'd like to tell everybody 'Here's something that works, not just for addicts. It's new life for the world.'
- CYNTHIA 'For further information on this remarkable cure-all please apply in person to Mr. Anonymous. He's too shy or too scared to tell you his name.'
- PAUL But have I a right to inflict pain, cause real damage to my Mother and all she cares about?
- CYNTHIA Such as?
- PAUL Such as social status, recognition, public office, keeping up with the Furnesses. I know it sounds silly, but my Mum started at the bottom, and every step up the ladder she's had to scheme and sweat for. You and I have had it pretty easy. I've made a hopeless mess of things as it is. Who am I to judge?
- CYNTHIA Let me tell you something about this precious article. You can write. You always could. It looks pretty good to me. Well, I know my Father. He's as tough as old boots. He's clawed his way up too. He's done it by not giving a damn what other people think. He hasn't always been much fun to live with, but I respect him a lot. If you show him that article, he may chuck it in the wastepaper

- CYNTHIA basket. He's not much on God. But he just might take it. He likes reality, and this reads pretty real to me. If he DOES decide to take it and you go and tell him you don't want your name on it, then he WILL chuck it out and you too. He does that with anonymous letters. He believes that if you've something to say, say it openly, in print so that people can take it or leave it. I agree with him. If you'd had the guts to tell me you were hooked on this drug racket, I might have felt you were a damn fool, but I'd at least have been glad that you thought enough of our friendship to tell me. And now, if you've found the light of the world, or whatever, I'd think more of you if you dared to tell the world in person. Isn't there something about not hiding your light under a bushel. Oh, I know I'm not one to talk, I'm a spoilt so-and-so. I spend too much, pamper myself, run around too much. I may be the ruin of that brother of yours. In fact I'm going to tell him what I really feel tonight. But that's another story.
- PAUL What d'you mean? Things are alright with you and Geoffrey aren't they?
- CYNTHIA You wouldn't confide in me when you were in a jam. Why should I confide in you?
- PAUL I wish you would.
- CYNTHIA Oh hell. Who is there to talk to? That's one of the curses of life. No-one has time. No-one wants to listen.
- PAUL We used to talk for hours, on the telephone.
- CYNTHIA (*Showing ring*) D'you see this?
- PAUL It's super. Must have cost a fortune.
- CYNTHIA Well, a lot anyway. I've expensive tastes and poor old Geoffrey is a bit too anxious to please.
- PAUL I bet he was thrilled to get it for you.
- CYNTHIA He was. So thrilled that it scares me. I'm wondering if I ought to give it back.
- PAUL Oh no. He's crazy about you.
- CYNTHIA But do I love him enough? He's sweet and sincere, and terribly in love. But funnily enough I have old-fashioned ideas about marriage. I want it to be for keeps.
- PAUL But of course. Geoffrey's one in a million. I've looked up to him all my life. He's steady and reliable, all the things I'm not.
- CYNTHIA And you're all the things he's not.
- PAUL That's right. A hopeless dreamer, who's always letting people down.

PAUL

(*Contd*)

I'm surprised you even want to speak to me.

CYNTHIA

You're also human and creative and terribly vulnerable. That's what I love about you.

PAUL

Oh give over. Remember you've said 'Yes' to Geoffrey.

CYNTHIA

That day in the car, while he was giving me that driving lesson and I was concentrating like mad getting those damn gears to work, going into reverse by mistake. Do you know he suddenly took me by surprise. For once he did something totally unexpected, original, almost poetic, something you might have done. Asked me to change gear and marry him, just like that. For one crazy moment I forgot it was Geoffrey sitting there in the seat beside me, and imagined it was . . . Paul.

PAUL

Don't be an ass, Cynthia, don't talk like that.

CYNTHIA

And then when we came on straight back to this house to break the glad tidings, there you were large as life, a bit larger than you used to be. It was as if you had risen from the dead. You have kind of risen from the dead, haven't you, according to this story of yours. Oh Paul, why did you leave it so late? Why didn't you stage your resurrection a bit sooner?

PAUL

Listen, Geoffrey will be here any minute. Remember he's the one that matters now. Not me. I could never step into my brother's shoes. Never.

CYNTHIA

I let him step into yours. I don't know what to do. Geoff and I had a flaming row over lunch in Solly's steakhouse today. We quite often do over silly things that don't matter a damn. But is that going to be our life? I came here now to . . . Oh, I don't know whether to make it up or break it off. If you're so sure of this wonderful God of yours, can't you help me? The truth is my life is selfish and small and utterly empty and meaningless. You could . . . (*weeps*)

PAUL

There's nothing I can do, Cynthia, nothing. You and my own brother are engaged to be married. I'd be a traitor if I interfered in any way. God can help you if you'll let Him.

CYNTHIA

How? I don't even believe in Him.

PAUL

Well, take a leap of faith. Say 'Oh God, if there is a God. Please manage me, because I can't manage myself.' That's what I did. Take a leap into the pool.

CYNTHIA

Suppose there isn't any water.

PAUL

Then that'll be just too bad. I tell you what. I'm going to take a

PAUL leap too, right this minute. You've helped me to do it. I'm going to take this article to your Father's office now, with my name at the head of it.

(Enter Madge, preoccupied, late and in a hurry)

MADGE My goodness these buses are a menace in the rush hour. Hello Cynthia, love, so glad you've popped in. I'd ask you to stay for supper, except that I don't see how there's going to be any. *(Shouting)* Ernest. Don't forget we are due at the Drama Club reception. There was I waiting at the bus stop for at least fifteen minutes, and when at last a 23 does come of course the conductor, just a mere boy, says 'Full on top.' 'How do you know it's full?' I said. 'Have you counted?' I demanded the right to go up and see for myself whether he was telling the truth.

CYNTHIA Was he?

MADGE Unfortunately he was. *(Enter Ernest)* Oh, Ernest, love, there you are. I thought you'd have shut up shop by now and done something about food. You remember we're going to the reception for the new director of the Civic Theatre. Sherry or cocktails or something. You'll just have to eat lots and lots of those wretched little canapes. I'll bring some home in my bag. Cynthia, love, tell us all the news. And Paul, dear, what have you been doing?

PAUL I've been writing an article, or trying to.

MADGE You might have been doing something useful, preparing something for supper. You'll have to change, Ernest. What you've got on won't do at all.

ERNEST I suppose I might manage a different coat and tie.

MADGE Paul, love, could you try and make yourself helpful, see what's in the fridge.

PAUL Sorry, Mum. I'll be going out for a few minutes. I won't be long.

MADGE Of course, dear, whatever you say. Though I must say it's rather a pity to be home all day cluttering the house and pecking away at your old typewriter, and then as soon as your mother comes in, needing a little help, off you go, gone with the wind. *(Shouts)* Ernest, love, make it your pin-stripe grey. Or, no perhaps something a bit more arty. The new director's supposed to be rather avant-garde.

PAUL So long. I'll be back in no time. *(Exit)*

MADGE I wish that lad would settle down. Don't tell me messing with a typewriter constitutes an honest day's work.

CYNTHIA Paul writes extremely well, I'd say.

- MADGE Yes. But where will it get him?
- CYNTHIA You might be surprised.
- MADGE Our Paul's full of surprises, and I don't care for most of them. My dear, is that the ring Geoffrey got you?
- CYNTHIA That's right.
- MADGE Wouldn't you know it? Not a word to his old Mum. Just out and gets the best buy in Gilberts jewellery shop. Oh, I saw it in the window. Happened to mention it to our Geoff weeks ago. Where is Geoffrey?
- CYNTHIA I've been waiting for him. I want to have a talk.
- MADGE Well, of course. Plenty to talk about. Talking of talking – you should have heard how some people go on and on at the Public Library Committee. The way some of them carry on you might think they were the Poet Laureate. Yet I know for a fact that they haven't darkened the door of our shop for years. I doubt if they ever read a book.
- (Enter Ernest with a bow tie)*
- ERNEST People in libraries take out books they can't read. Whereas in book shops they read books they can't buy. Madge, love. Help me with this. Seeing as it's such an arty occasion I thought a bow tie might be in order.
- MADGE The new Director will probably be in corduroys and a dirty old sweat shirt, I'm afraid. So it's up to us to keep up standards. Especially tonight. It's a dead secret, and you're not to breathe a word, but I heard today, strictly off the record, that they're definitely putting forward my name for J.P.
- ERNEST Bravo, my dear, you've done it at last.
- MADGE Oh, go on with you. It's not so important except that I think we ought to have a bit more law and order in this town. And remember, not a word. A step in time makes nine.
- ERNEST I know, and there's no smoke between cup and lip.
- MADGE Help him, will you, Cynthia love. I've got to go and dress myself.
- CYNTHIA That's good news, Mrs. Barrow. I'm ever so glad.
- MADGE Thanks love. Look, if you and Geoff are hungry there's yesterday's stew in the fridge. It'll heat up alright. I bet our Paul will be hungry.
(Exit)
- CYNTHIA Let me, Mr. Barrow. I'm good at tying ties. My Dad's always going out to dinners and things and he hasn't learnt to tie his yet.
- ERNEST Thanks, my dear. It's going to be nice to have a daughter around

ERNEST

(Contd)

occasionally.

CYNTHIA

Will it? I only hope you won't be disappointed.

ERNEST

Why on earth should we be?

CYNTHIA

Tell me. Do you think marriage makes a person better or worse?

ERNEST

I doubt if it does either. From what I've observed, people seem to be just about the same after marriage as they were before. A bit more so perhaps.

CYNTHIA

Meaning?

ERNEST

If they're inclined to be mean and catty before marriage or unhappy and demanding, they'll as like be more so after. If they're happy and loving, they'll usually be all the more so as husbands and wives. I was pretty easy-going and comfortable before we married. Look at me now.

CYNTHIA

And Mrs. Barrow?

ERNEST

Well, she was a fairly hard driver in the bar. Had to be in those days when the customers could be rough and tough. She knew what most of 'em wanted before they asked for it. Well, you can observe the rest.

CYNTHIA

I do.

ERNEST

Mind you, she won't make a bad J.P. I'd be sorry for anyone who tried to pull the wool over her eyes. And between you and me, she's got a heart, though she tries to keep it a dead secret most of the time.

CYNTHIA

I'm afraid she sometimes gets on my nerves.

ERNEST

The thing to do when that happens is simply switch off. Or tune in to some other station.

CYNTHIA

And Geoffrey? What'll marriage do to him?

ERNEST

He's not given too much trouble as a son. He ought to make a pretty good husband.

CYNTHIA

I wish he'd come now. I feel all on edge. Tell me one more. How about Paul?

ERNEST

Our Paul's a puzzle. Always has been. A dreamer. A rebel. Now, I'm afraid he's a bit of a fanatic.

CYNTHIA

Better a fanatic than an addict, I'd say.

ERNEST

So you know. I suppose everyone knows really. You don't keep much to yourself in a small town like ours. Things get around. For myself, I don't mind if they do. People's lives are their own business.

ERNEST

(Contd)

But his Mother now

(Geoffrey Enters)

GEOFFREY Hello, dad. Cynthia darling. That's marvellous you're here. I was coming round to you as soon as I got changed, to make up that silly quarrel of ours. Only your old man dashed out of his office early and left me to clear up after him.

CYNTHIA Geoffrey. Can we talk somewhere privately? I came round specially.

GEOFFREY Of course. Anytime anywhere. How do you like the ring, Dad? Pretty alright, what? Have you shown it to him?

CYNTHIA *(Strained)* Look. I've waited for you to come home.

GEOFFREY Alright, darling, alright. Give us a kiss. There now. Give the working man a chance. Let me just have a wash and brush up.

(Enter Madge in Long Dress)

MADGE Zip me up somebody. And for goodness sake don't let it get stuck. The last time I wore this I couldn't get in and I couldn't get out. Yes, Cynthia love, would you mind? These men approach a zipper as if they were stripping wall-paper. Hello Geoffrey, love. Give your old Mother a kiss. We're soon going to lose you, so we'd better make the most of you. *(He goes)* Ernest. That coat is so messy. Give it a really good brush.

ERNEST Alright, Mother. Just as you say. *(To Cynthia)* See what I mean. *(Exit)*

MADGE Now, what did he mean by that? *(Shouting)* Oh, Ernest, when you come down, bring my fur cloak. You'll find it on the bed. And be sure and bring your cheque book. We need to renew our subscription to the Dramatic Society. It's going to be quite the thing next winter with this new Director. Sure you and Geoffrey wouldn't like to come with us. They need young talent.

CYNTHIA *(Exasperated)* No, thanks. What we're really looking for is a little peace and quiet. A chance to talk.

MADGE Well, of course. Why didn't you say so? You're looking just a wee bit peaky, dear. *(Enter Geoffrey)* I was just saying Geoff that your Cynthia looks a bit pale. You mustn't run her off her feet.

CYNTHIA If we could just go into the front room, Geoffrey.

MADGE You can have the whole place to yourselves soon as we're gone. Except for our Paul. And where he is I simply don't know. He's a mystery to me.

GEOFFREY It's funny. I thought I saw him dashing into the Sentinel building

GEOFFREY

(Contd)

just as I came out. I was a bit late and hurrying so I didn't stop.

MADGE

Geoffrey, I wish you'd talk to our Paul. You know, privately, heart-to-heart. He looks up to you. He always has. Could you help him to settle down? Find the right job. He doesn't seem to want to live a normal life. He misses the farm, I expect, all that fresh air. This reading of books, the Bible and that, all this trying to write articles. I suppose it's fair enough for a hobby but it won't help him make a mark in this world. Now our Geoff, as you'll find out, Cynthia love, is just as dependable as clockwork.

CYNTHIA

(Bursting out) Oh, for goodness sake be quiet can't you? I don't want to marry a clock. *(Runs out of the room)*

GEOFFREY

Now, look what you've done, Mother. Upset her good and proper.

MADGE

Well, I'm sure I don't know what I said or did that could have upset anyone. I hope she isn't going to be one of that moody sort. You'd better go to her lad. *(Geoffrey goes – Enter Ernest)* That's a lot better, love. I don't know what's come over our Cynthia. She turned on me quite nasty. Our Geoffrey too. These young people are all so full of themselves.

ERNEST

Better leave them be, Mother. They'll work it out.

MADGE

That's what you say about everything.

ERNEST

Not everything. Look, Madge, while we've a moment to ourselves, there's something I want to talk to you about, something that does worry me.

MADGE

What's that? You haven't been having those heart flutters again have you? Pure indigestion. That's what the doctor said.

ERNEST

It's not that. It's the shop.

MADGE

Business is looking up, isn't it?

ERNEST

We've never taken in so much money.

MADGE

Well I suppose we shouldn't bother too much about the length of their hair, so long as they pay cash.

ERNEST

Some of the cash is disappearing.

MADGE

Are you sure? How much?

ERNEST

Quite a lot. Not all at once. That's why I didn't notice it at first. It's here a bit, there a bit. It adds up to a fair sum. I'd say about sixty pounds, or rather more.

MADGE

That's awful. Being a Magistrate is going to mean extra expense. And our Geoff getting married and all. Is it one of the customers?

- ERNEST I don't think so. We keep the till locked. Nobody'd have time to break it open.
- MADGE Who has the key?
- ERNEST Only me and Elaine.
- MADGE I wouldn't trust that girl farther than I could throw her.
- ERNEST I thought of her of course, but I don't think so. I tackled her right away. I hated to do it but I felt I had to.
- MADGE What did she say?
- ERNEST She looked me in the eye, and she said: 'I may have one or two bad habits but stealing isn't one of them. Take my key to the till, and check up on every sale at the end of the day.' The fact is it isn't during business hours when the money disappears. It's when the shop's shut and I put it in the safe.
- MADGE Well, who could do that? I mean the place hasn't been broken into, has it?
- ERNEST It could only be someone who knows where the safe key's kept. Here in the house.
- MADGE Could it be our Paul?
- ERNEST I suppose it could be. He's helped in the shop. He knows where everything is.
- MADGE Don't forget what Mr. Carter said. He said it was a bit of a risk letting him come back.
- ERNEST But he's so different. Like a new person.
- MADGE Well, I hope so. I sincerely hope so. But you know what they say. 'Once an addict. Always an addict.'
- (Enter Paul. He is rather worked up and militant)*
- PAUL I don't know who you're talking about, but it isn't true you know. In fact it's a damned lie.
- MADGE Oh, Paul, love, what a surprise. We didn't know where you'd got to.
- PAUL And to prove it isn't true I'll tell you what's going to happen. Mr. Carter's setting up a Centre here for addicts, somewhere where they can come in off the streets and get a little hope and care. Then, if they mean business they may be able to go on where I went, to the farm.
- MADGE That's not true. How do you know all this?
- PAUL That's what Mr. Carter was fixing up when he brought me over here. I'd like to help him, if I can.
- MADGE Nonsense. There's some mistake. It wouldn't be allowed.

- PAUL Why not? There are plenty of addicts in this town.
- MADGE It would only encourage more. Take them away to the country by all means where they won't do any harm. This has all been discussed. The whole town's dead against it.
- ERNEST Oh come on Madge. What d'you mean the whole town?
- MADGE I mean the people who count, people who toil and sacrifice to make this a place to be proud of, to bring up our children in. People like the Mayor, the Furnesses . . .
- PAUL Are they the town? Aren't the young people on the streets with nowhere to go, with no-one who cares, aren't they also the town? If you're talking about Tom Furness, we'll see what he really thinks very soon.
- ERNEST What do you mean by that, son?
- PAUL Never mind. Just wait and see.
- MADGE Wait and see what? I don't like your tone of voice. You sound very cocky and pleased with yourself. Where have you been anyway? Geoffrey says he saw you hanging around the Sentinel offices.
- PAUL That's right.
- MADGE Doing what, may I ask?
- PAUL You may as well know. I took in an article that I've written. A rather lurid story. Rather shocking. Not quite nice in a nice town like this. It just happens to be true.
- ERNEST Better be careful what you're saying, Paul.
- PAUL Why should I be careful? This story could be multiplied fifty times right here in this town. Today. Only far worse. Ending in prison, in mad-houses, in suicide, in despair. My story, unlike most, has hope in it. It's a story of life out of death. It's what millions of people are crying out for all over the world.
- ERNEST All the same, you shouldn't have done it, Paul. Your Mother here won't like it one little bit.
- PAUL I knew you'd say that, Dad. But why does everyone around here have to tailor their whole lives to what Mother likes or doesn't like? Is she the only one who's allowed to blow off steam any way she pleases while the rest of us pipe down?
- ERNEST There are certain things we all have to accept in life for the sake of peace and harmony.
- PAUL Well, I don't accept them. Just because you've spent a lifetime, Dad, playing it safe, hedging on every issue, kow-towing to everyone around you, especially Mum.

- ERNEST I hardly think, Paul, you are quite the one to adopt this high-handed attitude. After all, think where you've just come from.
- MADGE (*Like steel*) Alright, Ernest. Leave this to me. First of all, where is this mad, conceited, self-glorifying article of yours?
- PAUL It isn't those things, Mother. It's the truth.
- MADGE I asked you where. Did you give it to anyone?
- PAUL It's addressed to Mr. Furness in person. And it's marked private. I put it on his desk myself.
- MADGE (*Shouting*) Geoffrey. Geoffrey. Come here at once.
- ERNEST Now wait a minute. Let's talk this over quietly and reasonably.
- MADGE While you're talking things over quietly and reasonably he'll be in the headlines the day after tomorrow. Geoffrey.
- GEOFFREY (*Entering*) What's the matter for goodness sake? You're shouting the house down.
- MADGE Did you say your boss was leaving the office early tonight?
- GEOFFREY Yes. He's going to the same reception you're going to. Look, Cynthia and I . . .
- MADGE Cynthia can wait. You're to go to the office at once. You can get in, can't you?
- GEOFFREY Yes, but Cynthia and I are having a very important talk. We . . .
- MADGE Look on Mr. Furness's desk and find what this brother of yours has put there, with his religious mania or whatever it is he's got.
- PAUL It's not religious mania. It's God's truth.
- MADGE (*Taking no notice*) It's an envelope with some kind of sensational sob-story in it, marked 'Private' and addressed to Tom Furness personally. Get it and bring it back here.
- PAUL That article is mine, it's nothing to do with you.
- MADGE Get it, Geoffrey.
- GEOFFREY Mother, I can't. Not now. It's our whole life. Our future.
- MADGE Do you think this isn't my future? All our future. (*To Paul*) I suppose you put your name on it?
- PAUL Yes, I did. And I'm glad I did.
- MADGE Oh, of course. You wouldn't lost a chance to advertise yourself, would you now? Alright, Geoffrey, see what you can do. It's for all our sakes. Yours too and Cynthia's. Do you think she'll want to get mixed up in a family scandal?
- PAUL You may think it's a scandal. For me it's a miracle.

- ERNEST Look Madge, we're late for the party. I think we ought to think about this. Sleep on it.
- MADGE Oh, you sleep on everything. Well, you'll wake up sometime with a nightmare. Explain to Cynthia for goodness sake. She can wait. You don't want to be tied hand and foot to your wife, do you?
- GEOFFREY (*Dignified*) No, Mother. With your example in front of me, I don't think I do. I'll go and speak to Cynthia. (*Exit*)
- MADGE Thank goodness there's one man in this house who has some regard for decency and the family.
- PAUL Look, you can't do this. I'm entitled to say or write what I please. Aren't you going to stand up to her, Dad? You know why she's like this. It's sheer ambition.
- ERNEST I wish I felt you were free from ambition, Paul. You seem rather high-handed and too sure of yourself to me. Take care you aren't riding for a fall.
(*Enter Geoffrey*)
- GEOFFREY I'd like to tell you that Cynthia has just run out of the house in tears. She doesn't want to see me again.
- PAUL Oh, no Geoff. I'm terribly sorry.
- GEOFFREY Don't whine at me that you're sorry. If you want to know what Cynthia's really upset about, it's you. It's all because of a talk she had with you this afternoon. You're trying to bust up our engagement.
- PAUL It's not true. I was trying to help.
- GEOFFREY Oh, yes, you're trying to help everybody. Well, before you do any more damage with your uninvited help, I wish you'd go back to the drop-outs and the addicts and the scum of the earth. Go where you belong, for God's sake.
- PAUL (*Furious*) Let me tell you those scum, as you call them, have got more understanding and care and . . . Christianity in their little finger than you have in your whole body. You're like the Pharisees who've persecuted Christ all down the ages.
- MADGE Oh, so now you're Jesus Christ and the twelve Apostles all rolled into one. (*Pause*) Come along Ernest. We're late for the reception. The Mayor will be there and the Furnesses and the people who matter in this town. We're going to talk to them about this crack-brained scheme for encouraging addicts.
- ERNEST Good night, Paul. Think it over quietly. You'll see sense in the morning.
- PAUL Oh, for God's sake, shut up.

- MADGE That's just like you Paul. Think you're so holy and righteous but treat me and your father like dirt. You know, I think I preferred you when you were down and out in that hospital. I could understand you then. Alright Geoffrey, you know what to do
- PAUL I'm not going to let you go.
- MADGE Oh, and by the way Paul, there's money missing from your father's shop.
- PAUL What do you mean?
- MADGE Only that you might stay here and think about that.
- PAUL Are you suggesting . . . ?
- GEOFFREY Alright Mother, I'll try and get that article. *(Goes)*
- MADGE *(To Paul)* You needn't wait up for us. Just think over what we've said. We'll talk in the morning. *(To Ernest)* For goodness sake, hurry up! *(They leave)*
- PAUL *(In great distress)* If everybody else denies you, Lord, I won't. I swear I won't.
(Elaine comes in quietly from the darkened shop.)
- ELAINE Hello Paul.
- PAUL Elaine.
- ELAINE They've all gone haven't they?
- PAUL Go away. Please. What do you want?
- ELAINE I thought you might like some company. Someone to cheer you up.
- PAUL Go away Elaine. I don't want to talk to you. Not tonight.
- ELAINE Why ever not? We always had our best talks at night. Relax. Let go. Take off into space and feel good. Live in glorious technicolour — violet, purple, squish. That's what you used to call it. Remember?
- PAUL That's all over now.
- ELAINE Is it? You're not quite so sure as you were, are you?
- PAUL Yes. I am. I'm sure.
- ELAINE You got me started, Paul. But after that I was always stronger than you, wasn't I?
- PAUL You're not stronger than Christ.
- ELAINE We'll have to see about that, won't we? Didn't He say, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?'
- PAUL He rose again. Rose from the dead.
- ELAINE Did He? Look around the world. Look at this town. It's hard to

ELAINE

(Contd)

be sure.

PAUL

I'm sure.

ELAINE

Fine. Have it your way. I just brought you something. *(Produces a small packet)*. *(Paul turns away and starts to shake)* Thought you might like to share it with me — you know for old times sake and all that. Some of the old gang have been asking after you. They haven't forgotten you.

PAUL

You're a pusher, aren't you?

ELAINE

Come on, don't be so square. I'm just in a generous mood, that's all. Don't want to keep it all to myself.

PAUL

Get out of here. I'll report you to the police.

ELAINE

That's no way to treat old friends. Besides, I thought you were a Christian. Love your enemies and all that. And don't forget — whatever I am, you're responsible.

PAUL

I know. There's no need to rub it in. It doesn't excuse what you're doing now. You've even been robbing my Father's till.

ELAINE

So you think that, do you? Well, you're wrong. I've all the cash I need. And I know where to get more. Your father's beginning to wonder if it isn't you.

PAUL

It's a lie. Are you trying to destroy me?

ELAINE

Maybe. Maybe not. Love and destruction grow very close together, you know. Well goodbye Paul. I'll go now. I don't want anyone else to find me here. Sleep well. Happy dreams. I'll leave this for you, just in case. *(She slips out quickly)*

PAUL

Though all deny you. I won't. I won't. Never. *(He starts to tremble and to struggle with himself, taking side-long glances at the packet)*

CURTAIN

ACT III SCENE 1

(Three weeks later. Afternoon around six. Glasses, plates, food are set out on a buffet. Madge, in an apron, over another dazzling creation, is checking up on everything. She is tense and excited. Ernest comes in from the shop.)

- MADGE *(counting glasses, etc.)* Two, four, six, seven. Two, four, six, seven. That seems like just about the lot. Seven of everything. I'm leaving the drinks to you, love. Cynthia's promised to help with the food. I shall be free to float.
- ERNEST You'll float beautifully, my dear. You always do. After all, you're the hostess, and the guest of honour, both.
- MADGE I don't know why I should be nervous. It isn't a party. Just us and the Furnesses. Family really, now that Geoffrey and Cynthia are on their way to the altar. Rose has promised to bring Tom. That's the big thing.
- ERNEST He may give you a paragraph in his 'Around Town' column.
- MADGE D'you think so? A private affair in our home?
- ERNEST He will if he's short of copy. D'you remember when we celebrated the fifty years of this shop, our Golden Jubilee? I didn't want publicity. I've always had a mistrust of anniversaries, birthdays and the like. It never seems to me a cause for congratulation merely that you've gone on existing for a certain number of years. It might have been a greater cause for rejoicing if you'd been gone long since. Anyway, Tom Furness asked me for a steak at Solly's one night, just the two of us. We yarned away and drank more than was good for us. Next week in 'Around Town' there was an item about how he'd attended a Jubilee Dinner at Solly's Steak House to mark the 50 years of Barrow's Book Shop, how he'd proposed a toast and I'd replied. You'd have imagined there were quite fifty people present instead of just two. Don't bother about listening. I'm just rambling on to try and steady you down.
- MADGE I wish it was going to be only the two of us now. It's a funny feeling just before a party when it's all ready for the guests to arrive. Calm before the storm.
- ERNEST Come on, Madge. That's not like you. I'm the one who always feels like going to bed at this point in the proceedings. Cheer up, love. It's a great occasion. We don't have a J.P. in our family every day.
- MADGE And I must admit the family are rallying round. Our Cynthia's becoming quite one of us. She even called me Mother Barrow the other day, and said she was sorry for that little upset the other night when she ran crying out of the house. You know that awful night when we had to rescue Paul's article from the Sentinel.

- ERNEST Pity in a way. That was a really good bit of writing. Best he's ever done.
- MADGE He'd have done in himself alright, us too.
- ERNEST Has he ever spoken about it since?
- MADGE Not even asked for it back. I think he's had second thoughts. Thanks his lucky stars we were on to it in time. He's been more himself lately. Not quite so thick with the Almighty. I was surprised when he suggested all on his own spending the week-end with his Auntie Millie. I always had to nag at him to make him take any notice of that old bag, that is if he wanted anything in her will.
- ERNEST He'll be back in time for this, won't he?
- MADGE Last thing he said 'I'll be back, Mum. Don't worry.' Are you changing your coat, or must you go back into the shop?
- ERNEST Late closing tonight. But Elaine will cover it.
- MADGE She's useful I'll admit. But don't let her act as if she owned the place. Have you been missing any more cash?
- ERNEST That's the only thing worries me. Still a bit here and a bit there.
- MADGE Had you better get on to the Police?
- ERNEST I'll have to. I've held off so far not wanting a lot of to-do. You know just in case it should turn out to be
- MADGE Here's our Cynthia
(Cynthia enters with an iced cake)
- CYNTHIA Hello, Mother Barrow. A great day.
- MADGE Hello, love. You do look a treat. Where's your Ma and Pa?
- CYNTHIA Mother has driven down to the office to pick up Daddy.
- MADGE What's this you're bringing?
- CYNTHIA Just something I've cooked up. Hope it hasn't got dented.
- MADGE It's right smashing. J.P. in pink icing. Who'd have thought it? Thanks, love. That's very thoughtful. *(Wiping a tear)* I'll be going all sentimental at this rate and that'll never do for a Magistrate. Take it into the kitchen, dear, and we'll bring it out at the appropriate moment.
- CYNTHIA That's right. Just when Daddy looks as if he's going to have one or two too many. *(Goes to the kitchen)*
- MADGE Kiss me, Ernest. Quick you old stick in the mud. I'm not often in the mood. Did you know you've a spot of ink on that lapel? Remind me when you change and I'll try and take it off in the

- MADGE
(Contd) morning. (*Cynthia returns*) That cake's a knock-out love, and we are a bit short on the eats.
(*A door slams off*)
Help us, here they come. (*She throws her apron over to Ernest who puts it in the cupboard*)
(*Enter Rose and Geoffrey*)
- ROSE Madge! Congratulations, love.
- MADGE Rose, dear. It's sweet of you to come. And you so busy always. Where's your Tom? We're counting on him.
- ROSE My dear, he's still at the office. You know him. He's putting the paper to bed.
- ERNEST And there's a last minute story come in, I bet.
- ROSE Much worse. There isn't. He's short of copy and he's looking for that juicy little tit-bit for the front page.
- GEOFFREY (*Examining the food*) Looks like some juicy little tit-bits here. There we are Mum. (*Produces corsages*) Here's to the great day. One for you too, love. (*Pins one on Cynthia.*)
- CYNTHIA Thanks love. You're very dear, and extravagant.
- GEOFFREY The Boss told me I was officially designated to escort his wife in his place.
- MADGE Well, it's too bad he's not here, after promising and all. But I reckon he'll be calling on you more and more to act in his place. Now sit down everyone. (*But Rose is already sitting*) Make yourselves at home. Ernest, love, do the doings. Now, let's see, what about eats?
- CYNTHIA You sit back and relax, Mother Barrow. I'll see to the handing around.
- MADGE Thanks dear. Shouldn't be surprised if I do put on a few airs this time. Lean back and bask a bit. After all this hasn't happened overnight. It's been a long climb.
- ROSE Aye, and you've been glad of a shove or two on bottom from some of us.
- GEOFFREY (*Looking at records*) Let's have some appropriate background music.
- ERNEST How about Beethoven's fifth. V for Victory. Pom, pom, pom, POM.
- GEOFFREY Here's 'My Fair lady.' Bit more in keeping. (*Puts it on*)
- ROSE How's your Paul? I do hope we're going to see him this evening.
- MADGE He's been spending the week-end with his Auntie. But he'll be here alright. He promised.

- CYNTHIA I do hope he comes. There's something I'm dying to tell him. Something exciting.
- MADGE Ernest, you've never changed that coat. How many times have I had to mention it?
- GEOFFREY Three warnings from the Bench, Dad, and you'll be sent down for a spell.
- ROSE Ernest's on permanent probation. *(Laughs)*
- ERNEST May the prisoner be excused, Your Honour? He'll be back in the dock in no time. *(Exit)*
- MADGE Go on with you. I wonder how I'll do.
- ROSE Do what, love?
- MADGE You know. Giving orders. Passing sentence and the like.
- CYNTHIA You'll do it to the manner born.
- ROSE Well, of course. You've been doing it all your life, love. *(Laughs)*
- MADGE I'm not sure I care for the sound of that remark.
(The music rises and the conversation rises to match it. Ernest in a velvet smoking jacket returns to pass more drinks – at the height of the festivities Paul enters quietly – He looks rather dishevelled and flushed – He is not drunk – But very strained, self-conscious – He is staring round the company looking for someone – Suddenly they see him)
- GEOFFREY Paul, you old rascal. You've made it.
- ERNEST Come on, Paul. Come and join the party.
- PAUL Hello, Geoffrey. Hello everyone. Where's Elaine? She said she would be here.
- MADGE Paul, love. You've come just in the nick of time. Everyone's been asking for you. Come and say hello to Rose.
- PAUL Hello, Mrs. Furness. Mum, where's Elaine?
- MADGE Well, I must say, this is a funny way to greet your old Mother. All on her great day too. You haven't even said congratulations. Give me a kiss.
- PAUL Sorry, Mum. Congratulations. It is a great day. I'm proud of it. You've gone up the ladder. Just watch out for those snakes. They can take you right down to the bottom again. Just like that – *(Bursting out)* For God's sake. Turn off that ghastly, insipid music. Give us something with a beat. And where's Elaine?
(Geoffrey stops music)
- MADGE Mind your manners, young man. This is your family I'd have you

- MADGE remember. We're all one big united, happy family now. Isn't that right, Rose dear?
(*Contd*)
- ROSE Of course dear. Paul hasn't quite got used to family life again, I expect. You haven't even said hello to Cynthia. Aren't you going to greet your new sister-in-law to be?
- PAUL Hello, Cynthia. You're looking lovely. Terribly chaste and all that.
- CYNTHIA Hello, Paul. I've been dying to see you again. I've got news for you. Come over here. (*Draws him aside*)
- MADGE I don't know what's come over the lad. Can't you do something Ernest? Don't just sit there.
- ERNEST He'll be alright, Mother. Give him a chance.
(*Conversation continues but fades*)
- MADGE That's typical of Ernest. Everything's bound to be alright. Sit back. Do nothing.
- CYNTHIA (*To Paul*) A party may not be quite the time for this but I've just been bursting to tell you. You see, you're the only one who'll understand. I've been trying it, Paul.
- PAUL What do you mean?
- CYNTHIA Trying what you said. What you told me the other night. And it really works.
- PAUL What works? I say, Cynthia, could you find Elaine?
- CYNTHIA I've been taking the high dive you talked about. Asking God or someone to take over where I can't cope myself. And that includes pretty nearly everything.
- PAUL Oh, that.
- CYNTHIA Yes. That. I wanted you to know, Paul, because you see, you're responsible. You're right. There is water in the pool.
- PAUL I don't know what you're talking about.
- CYNTHIA Yes you do. You told me to say: 'Oh God, if there is a God. Please manage me for I can't manage myself.' Well, I did it. There was nothing spectacular. No ringing bells. No beatific vision. But now I seem to start the day with hope instead of a hangover. People seem quite bearable. I actually like them. I haven't said a word to Geoffrey yet. I want you to help me to explain. But I'm sure he must have noticed some difference. You know, I believe we are going to be able to make a go of it after all.
- PAUL (*Only half listening*) Great. I'm glad. But don't ask me for help.
- CYNTHIA Paul. Are you alright? I thought you'd be interested.

- PAUL Sorry Elaine. I mean Cynthia. I am interested.
- CYNTHIA Well, you see, I owe it all to you. And I'm such a hopeless beginner. But what you said that night made sense to me. It was something that I've been looking for actually all my life. So I just took the plunge. God's there when you really need Him, isn't He? And believe me, I need Him pretty bad.
- PAUL That's great, Cynthia. Great. I'm truly glad. Make the most of it while it lasts.
- CYNTHIA What do you mean? You mean it doesn't last? Oh, but that's not true. It can't be true.
- PAUL Look. I'll explain some other time. We'll have a little talk about it. There's water in the pool, just as I said. But sometimes they have to change the water. Do you think you could find Elaine?
- CYNTHIA *(Almost in tears)* I can't believe it, Paul. You of all people. I'll go and fetch the cake. *(Runs out)*
- MADGE Go and talk to him, Geoffrey. He's upset Cynthia now. Do something. Your father's no good. Do go on with your story Rose dear. I'm fascinated.
- ROSE I must say, your Paul's Auntie, or whoever it is he was with, seems to have had quite an effect.
(Conversation continues)
- GEOFFREY *(Going across to Paul)* You alright, old chap? Here. Try some of this. Pick you up a bit.
- PAUL *(Drinking it in one gulp)* Thanks, Geoff. Say, that's alright. I'd forgotten how good it tasted. Get me another, will you? I need something strong.
- GEOFFREY Sure I'll get you another. But for God's sake watch yourself. Remember. This is Mother's big day. You seem to have upset Cynthia again. You're always messing things up with her.
(Cynthia enters with cake. It has five burning candles)
- CYNTHIA Congratulations, Mother Barrow. *(Oohs and Aahs)*
- MADGE Oh, that's right lovely, that is. What do the candles represent?
- PAUL They're prisoners up for trial. She just blows 'em out. *(He blows out the candles)*
- CYNTHIA Paul! They represent a special wish from each one of us. Mother, myself, Mr. Barrow, Geoffrey and you, Paul.
- PAUL That's right. Good old Paul. The black sheep turned white, turned black again. The walking miracle. Now you see him: now you don't.
- ERNEST Steady, Paul. Wouldn't you like to go upstairs for a bit?

- PAUL Certainly not. I'd like a drink. Mother likes me to drink. It makes me one of the family. Besides I'm going to propose a toast.
- MADGE Oh, for God's sake stop him someone.
- PAUL Hand me another drink, Geoff. I'm going to make a speech.
- CYNTHIA Paul, dear. (*Takes his arm*)
- PAUL It's alright, Cynthia. Not to worry. I'm just taking that famous high-dive into the pool. There's water there, or at least something or other. (*Raising glass*) To my Mother. The best of pals. The one to whom you unburden all your troubles, except that, like most parents, she talks so much you seldom get a word in edgeways.
- MADGE What do you mean, Paul? Please be quiet.
- PAUL Not today, Mother. This is my turn. 'To my Mother who has risen from the bar to the Bench.' You began your career as a barmaid, serving people a little bit of what's good for them. Now, on the Bench, you'll be doling out great, fat slices of what's good for them. You used to clean and polish up the bar. Now you'll clean and polish up the town, sweeping nicely under the carpet all us misfits dropping us disused empties into the dustbin, along with all the other messy, stinking failures of life. Out of sight, out of mind.
- MADGE Someone please stop him.
- CYNTHIA Let him go on. I think we need to hear it.
- PAUL Thank you Cynthia. You're the only one who understands. (*Becoming a bit maudlin*) You see, people like us are so embarrassing and out of place in a nice, clean respectable joing like our town. So get rid of us. The only trouble is sometimes we pop out, like me tonight, with rather untoward results. 'To my Mother.' Good luck for the Bench where you're going from the Dock, where I belong. Give us what we deserve. But for pity's sake give us what we need . . . what we crave . . . what we'll die without. (*Breaking down*) Elaine. Elaine. Put me out of my misery. You promised to be here. You promised.
- MADGE Get her Ernest. Anything but this. Come Rose. (*Madge and Rose leave*)
- PAUL (*Desperately trying to pull himself together*) Ladies and gentlemen, charge your glasses. I give you a toast -- 'To my Mother' . . . (*Elaine enters with Ernest*) Elaine! Bless you. You're here after all. You've kept your word. Where is it, Elaine? I need it now. Right away. Do you hear.
- ELAINE Don't be a fool, Paul. Do you know where you are? All these

- ELAINE
(*Contd*) people. You're out of your mind.
- PAUL (*Whimpering*) But you promised. You said you'd be here.
- ELAINE In the shop, you idiot. Not at the party. It's late closing in the shop.
- PAUL I don't care where. You've got it, haven't you? tucked away somewhere. You always have. (*He snatches at her bag fumbling to open it*)
- ELAINE (*Urgently*) Shut up, Paul. You're wrecking everything.
- PAUL Elaine. Please. Only a little. Just one little fix. I'm finished without it. (*He falls flat, rolling on the ground*)
- ELAINE (*Taking command*) Here. Help me with him, someone. We'll get him on to this couch. (*To Geoffrey*) You. Take his feet. (*Together they lift him on to the couch*) Have you a blanket or something?
- GEOFFREY He's pouring with sweat.
- ELAINE Of course. What do you expect. We'll need towels and water to wipe his face. (*Cynthia goes*) (*To Geoffrey*) You take off his shoes. I'll loosen his collar.
- PAUL (*Starting to shake violently*) It's starting. The agony. You know how it is with me.
- ELAINE That's right. We've been through it before. You bloody fool. Why can't you keep it together, like me?
- PAUL I'll never be able to keep it together. It's seven bleeding days and nights a week for me for the rest of my life. I'm hooked again. Please. I'll pay you whatever you like. Just one little fix. One.
- ELAINE I can't help you, Paul. You've cleaned me out. (*He yells*) Alright, if you don't like it, keep away. I've done it before. So has he. Mr. Barrow, you'd better phone for an ambulance. Tell them it's an emergency. Hurry.
- ERNEST Yes. I'll do it at once. (*Goes*) (*Cynthia returns with towels, etc.*)
- ELAINE Thanks. Try and keep his forehead cool. (*Taking some tablets from her shoulder bag*) Here, Paul. These may help you for the moment. They'll calm you down. Try and swallow them.
(*Geoffrey hands a glass of punch from nearby table*)
Water, you nit. (*Geoffrey runs off*)
- ROSE (*Entering*) (*Madge follows*) Come along, Cynthia, we'd better be getting along. Goodbye, Madge, dear.
- CYNTHIA You go on, Mother. I'm staying. I belong here now.
- GEOFFREY (*Returns with water*) Here's water.

- PAUL Good old Geoff. Always ready with the appropriate drink. (*Knocks the glass out of his hand*) That's for taking my girl away from me. That's for a bloody thief.
- CYNTHIA Oh, Paul, don't.
- ELAINE Don't mind too much. He doesn't know half he's saying.
- MADGE Goodbye Rose. And you won't tell Tom will you. The paper.
- ROSE Don't worry love. We may have our differences. But we know what neighbours are for. Stay where you are love. I know the way. Good-night. (*Goes*)
- MADGE (*To Elaine*) Did you do this? God will never forgive you. Never.
- ELAINE Alright. Save your breath. And your prim, holy, self-righteous accusations. I did it if you like. I admit it. But so did you all. Every bloody one of you. Don't worry. He'll probably come out of this one. And the next, with luck. Maybe even the one after that.
- ERNEST (*Returning*) I've phoned the hospital. They understood. They're sending an ambulance immediately.
- ELAINE Good. He'll probably be asleep by the time they come. I tell you one thing. They're all going to have one hell of a night.
- MADGE You aren't even sorry. You aren't even ashamed.
- ELAINE I've long since got passed being sorry or ashamed. You just do what has to be done. That's all anyone can do in this miserable shambles they call life. (*Paul shakes and cries out*) Alright, man, stay quiet. You're not alone. We'll see you through. Not the first time, eh? And it won't be the last. You'd better let me go to the hospital with him. I know the ropes. (*To Ernest*) Will you shut up the shop?
- ERNEST (*With new firmness*) No. I'm going to the hospital. You do your job in the shop. What I pay you for. This is my son. It's my responsibility.
- MADGE (*Surprised*) But Ernest, how will you manage?
- ERNEST I'll manage. (*Sound of ambulance siren*) It's what she said. You do what has to be done. Stay and look after your Mother, Geoffrey.
- CYNTHIA I'll stay too. There must be something we can do.
- ERNEST Madge, dear, would you phone for Mr. Carter? I think he ought to know.
- MADGE (*Helpless for once*) Phone him? (*Herself again*) Geoffrey. Don't stand there looking so stupid. You ring Carter.
- GEOFFREY What's the use, Mother. He's a hundred miles away.

CYNTHIA I don't think that'd stop him. Give me the number.

MADGE It's by the phone. (*Cynthia goes*)

ELAINE They're prompt I will say. Don't want another corpse on their hands, do they? Alright. If you don't want me, I'll go and shut up the shop. They'll look after your son, Mrs. Magistrate!

CURTAIN

ACT III SCENE 2

(The next morning, early. Cynthia enters, dressed as the evening before — she begins to draw the curtains, but stops as she sees Geoffrey enter from the shop, stuffing something into his pockets. He steps softly into the room and closes the door gently behind him. He doesn't see Cynthia, who has been standing watching him, until she speaks.)

CYNTHIA Geoffrey!

GEOFFREY *(Startled)* Oh hello, darling. It's you. You took me by surprise.
(He goes towards her to kiss her but she turns away)

CYNTHIA What were you doing in there?

GEOFFREY *(Persisting)* Come on, how about a kiss?

CYNTHIA What were you doing in the shop?

GEOFFREY Oh, nothing. Just looking around.

CYNTHIA For what?

GEOFFREY Nothing I tell you. Anyway, why do you look so suspicious?

CYNTHIA Because you look so guilty.

GEOFFREY Do I?

CYNTHIA Yes. Like a small boy who has been scrumping apples and caught redhanded.

GEOFFREY If you must know, I went into the shop to make a phone-call.

CYNTHIA Oh?

GEOFFREY To the hospital. Remember.

CYNTHIA How is he?

GEOFFREY You know how it is. They don't tell you a thing. 'Doing as well as can be expected.' I ask you. What does that mean? I couldn't reach Dad. He hasn't been in touch all night. He might have been carried off by the Chinese slave-trade for all we know.

CYNTHIA So now we're with the Chinese slave trade, are we? Come back to the point, can't you?

GEOFFREY What point?

CYNTHIA You know what I mean.

GEOFFREY I would have thought Paul was the main point. Aren't you interested in him?

CYNTHIA Right now I'm more interested in you.

GEOFFREY Well, that makes a change.

CYNTHIA What were you stuffing into your pockets?

GEOFFREY When?

CYNTHIA As you came in.

GEOFFREY I wasn't . . . I mean . . . Oh, just some papers. (*Pause*) Don't you believe me?

CYNTHIA When you look like that -- no. Come on. (*She holds out her hand*)
(*He puts his hand into his jacket pocket and pulls out some bank-notes*)

CYNTHIA Geoff!

GEOFFREY You won't tell anyone, will you? Its only borrowed of course. I mean to pay it back.

CYNTHIA Of course. But what did you do it for?

GEOFFREY Promise you won't tell anybody . . . Dad . . . or Mum. I'll put it back. Now. All of it. Right away.

(*He turns back to the shop but Cynthia bars his way*)

CYNTHIA But why? Why? How could you do such a thing? And today of all days!

GEOFFREY Oh, don't you sound so shocked, so high and mighty. So judging. I'll tell you why I did it . . . why I've been taking money for weeks now . . . first a little . . . then a little more . . . then much more. I did it for you.

CYNTHIA For me?

GEOFFREY Yes, you. To satisfy your incessant demand for things, no matter how much they cost.

CYNTHIA Geoffrey! Stop it!

GEOFFREY Now who wants to change the subject, eh? You may as well hear the lot. How do you think I've managed to take you out to dinner twice a week, when you toy around with lobster or steak, and then leave half of it on your plate? How could I afford that great glittering ring? The one you chose, without even looking at the price! Where do you think it all comes from, eh? Not from your Dad, I can tell you, and what he pays me.

CYNTHIA Darling, you should have told me.

GEOFFREY You wouldn't have known what I was talking about. Did you want me to tell you I was too hard up to take you out? That I couldn't afford to marry you?

(*A silence between them*)

CYNTHIA But it's still wrong, Geoff. It's stealing.

GEOFFREY That's right. Stealing. Your fiancé — a thief. No, worse than a thief — robbing his own father. And who made me a thief? You did. And why? Because you're a prim little spoilt snob who doesn't know the value of money. That's why.

(Another silence)

CYNTHIA I've had that coming to me for a long time. Thank you, Geoffrey. At last someone has told me the truth about myself.

GEOFFREY I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said all that.

CYNTHIA Don't be sorry. It's the truth. For the first time you've given me what I needed instead of what I wanted.

GEOFFREY But you won't tell, will you, about me I mean?

CYNTHIA Of course not.

GEOFFREY Good.

CYNTHIA But you must.

GEOFFREY But I couldn't . . . I mean . . . Dad . . . and Mum . . .

CYNTHIA Isn't it what they need?

GEOFFREY The truth? You're crazy.

CYNTHIA To face reality. It's like drawing back the curtains on a darkened room. Don't let us have any shadows between us, Geoff, ever.

GEOFFREY Of course not, my dearest. Never.

CYNTHIA There's still one shadow, though, isn't there?

GEOFFREY You mean

CYNTHIA Paul. He knew about you didn't he? Last night, on that couch, he called you a thief. He accused you of stealing his girl. Me.

GEOFFREY He didn't know half of what he was saying. Anyway, I had a perfect right to propose to you, didn't I?

CYNTHIA And I had a right to accept.

GEOFFREY Well then.

CYNTHIA If I had known when you proposed, that on that very day, we were going to walk into this house and see your long-lost brother sitting there, looking fitter than he's ever looked in his life Why didn't you tell me he was coming home? You knew, didn't you?

GEOFFREY I had more important things to think about.

CYNTHIA I hadn't heard a word from him for over a year. We once loved each other. You knew that too.

GEOFFREY My brother was a drug addict. Is a drug addict.

- CYNTHIA He was changed. Cured.
- GEOFFREY Was he?
- CYNTHIA Did you ever read that article of his? His story.
- GEOFFREY Possibly. At least we got it back from the paper. Spared him that humiliation.
- CYNTHIA I wonder. I think that was what pushed him over the edge.
- GEOFFREY You mean it's our fault?
- CYNTHIA Think. It was after that business with the article that he started going off for his 'weekends with Auntie Millie.'
- (During this Madge has entered as spruce as ever)*
- MADGE I've never heard such a load of old rubbish. Good morning Cynthia dear. Good morning Geoffrey.
- BOTH Good morning
- MADGE What's the news from the hospital? I heard you phoning.
- GEOFFREY Nothing at all I'm afraid. Dad seems to be lost.
- MADGE Anyone less use in a crisis it'd be hard to find. Shall I get breakfast for you then?
- CYNTHIA Please don't bother. Coffee's ready. *(Goes)*
- MADGE I could do with coffee. Good and strong. I've a Committee this morning at Community Centre.
- GEOFFREY You're not going, are you?
- MADGE Why ever not?
- GEOFFREY Well, after yesterday
- MADGE Just because your brother made a damn fool exhibition of himself . . . all because of that bitch of a girl who your Father should never have had in his shop. I warned him, mind you.
- (Cynthia returns with coffee)*
- He wouldn't listen. None of you listen to me.
- CYNTHIA But we can't dismiss it all, just like that. Cover it all over as though it had never happened. What about Paul?
- MADGE You think I'm hard, don't you. Callous, that I don't care. Well, of course I care. He's my son, isn't he? But one thing I've learnt; when things are tough, hold your head high and carry on. That's the only way in this life.
- CYNTHIA But Mother Barrow . . .
- MADGE You're young, love, and impressionable. I've seen a lot of unpleasant-

- MADGE
(*Contd*) ness in my life. When things got rough in the bar where I used to work, people drinking too much, making asses of themselves, fights and such like, what did we used to do? Chuck 'em out into the street, and then get on with it as if nothing had happened. Otherwise we wouldn't have had a bar. Well, that's what I'm doing now. People won't know too much, if we're lucky. We'll keep our mouths shut. Your Mum's a good sort at heart. She promised not to talk. That newspaper article you're moaning and groaning about is in the wastepaper basket where it belongs. I knew it was a phoney from the start.
- CYNTHIA It wasn't a phoney. That article, and things Paul told me that night, they've changed my whole outlook. They've helped me make some sense in life.
- MADGE Your faith, or whatever it is, must seem a bit wobbly this morning.
- CYNTHIA It's not. That's the strange thing. Paul may have failed. We've all failed. That's not the point. I can't believe God has failed. Maybe He wants to use all this mess to open our eyes, show us the kind of people we really are.
- MADGE I'd stop all this soul-searching if I was you. Its not healthy. What you need to do, young woman, is to start making plans for that wedding of yours. You can thank your lucky stars that you've got a decent, steady, honest fellow wants to marry you. We'll have a good, slap-up wedding with all the trimmings. It'll help take people's minds off other things.
- CYNTHIA I see. I had a strange, old-fashioned idea that it was the bride's family who arranged the wedding.
(*Elaine enters from the shop*)
- ELAINE Hello.
- MADGE (*Taken aback*) What are you doing here? Get out of my house. Get out.
- ELAINE Cool it Mrs. Magistrate. I'm getting out, don't worry.
- MADGE How dare you even show your face in here after sneaking back and forth all summer doing your rotten trade, wrecking people's lives.
- ELAINE I just came to see Mr. Barrow before opening time. Hand him my resignation. Pick up my things.
- MADGE Resignation be damned. You're fired. As you should have been months ago. This is a police matter. You know what the penalties are for a pusher.
- ELAINE Don't waste breath. I know well enough. Actually you won't go to the police though, will you?

- MADGE We'll see about that.
- ELAINE You won't. Because if the police lay hold of me, I shall talk. I shall tell every detail of my life and your son's, how he first got me into this racket. How we lived together. Every sordid detail.
- MADGE Lies. Just a pack of lies.
- ELAINE I know your son very well, Mrs. Barrow. Better than any of you.
- MADGE Impertinence. Talking like this to his own mother. The fact is you took advantage of him because he's weak.
- ELAINE He's not weak. Do you know what it takes to come off hard drugs? He's worth the lot of you put together. You won't find this easy to believe, but I've loved Paul. In a way I do still. How is he? Have you heard? Please tell me.
- MADGE My Paul is where you've put him. And, whatever else, spare us the lies about love. Now will you get out, or do I get my son to throw you out?
- CYNTHIA No. Wait. I want to know what you mean. How can you possibly say that you love Paul, after what you have done?
- ELAINE People like me, and my crowd, like Paul was, we live in an entirely different world from yours. We have a different way of thinking and living, another culture even
- MADGE Culture indeed.
- GEOFFREY Alright, Mother. We may as well listen.
- ELAINE You may hate and despise it. We think it's as good as yours. Possibly better. A bit more real. And, mind you, looking around, that isn't saying very much. I came from a respectable, happy home. At least I thought it was happy. Until when I was fourteen my father, whom we all adored, suddenly walked out on my mother and the lot of us. It was a girl in the office half his age. Do you know what that does to you at fourteen? Mother started drinking too much, slobbering all over us kids, trying to soothe her wounded pride. When I was seventeen I went up to University to try for a scholarship. People thought I was fairly bright. And there, I met your son. He invited me to a party with his friends. To cut a very long story short, I never finished that scholarship exam. I never even went home, except months later to collect some things. My father walked out. I did too. I opted out of the whole scene, and joined the other world. 'The alternative society' as you call it. It's been hell sometimes, but I've known a few thrills, and a few friendships. At least we've seen the mess and the misery of your world, and tried to do something about it.

- MADGE And what do you think the likes of you can do?
- ELAINE Nothing, so long as the likes of you hold the reins. All the same there have been times when we've seen visions, dreamed dreams of a different kind of society altogether, and stretched out our arms towards it. Oh, yes, we've talked, and wept and laughed, and loved.
- CYNTHIA How could you have done what you did to Paul if you really loved him?
- ELAINE When Paul found God – and he found something – call it what you like – I knew I'd lost him. I hated that God, that something, that somebody, that had taken my guy away from me.
- CYNTHIA So you mean to say you deliberately set out to destroy him?
- ELAINE Look. I just wanted Paul to share his trips with me, that's all. You can live that way quite a long time if you've the guts and the luck. And if you die in the end, what of it?
- CYNTHIA You wanted him to be dependent on you again, to be your slave?
- ELAINE That's how he got me in the first place. That's how I wanted to get him.
- CYNTHIA And now you've got him, what are you going to do with him?
- ELAINE *(After a pause)* Alright. You win there. How the hell do I know?
- MADGE I'll tell you. She'll leave him to rot, and then move on and start wrecking the lives of another lot. You've told us a pretty little sob-story. You may fool them but you don't me. You and your like are the blood-suckers of society, the destroyers. Oh, yes, you talk big. You're the great emancipators. You're the enlightened ones. You're throwing off the shackles of the past, all the old taboos. Far too clever and advanced to be bothered with a few trifles like honour and decency and morality and such. You talk like you were Socrates or Michaelangelo, but you live like alley cats and then poor gormless idiots like my Paul pay the price for it.
- (Ernest comes quietly in – He has sat up all night – He is tired and drained – but he has a new quiet authority)*
- MADGE Ernest! About time too! Where have you been?
- ERNEST So you're here Elaine. I hoped you would be. Is that coffee stone cold?
- CYNTHIA I'll get you some fresh. *(Exit)*
- ERNEST *(He sits down and takes off his shoes)* Get me my slippers, Geoffrey, please.
- GEOFFREY Alright, Dad. *(Fetches them)*

- ERNEST It was a terrible night. But when he's slept it off, Mr. Carter will be taking him back to the farm.
- MADGE Can't you start at the beginning, Ernest? What have you been doing all the time? Why didn't you phone?
- ERNEST What have I been doing? Waiting mostly. Watching. Even trying to pray. O yes, I'm not supposed to believe in God. The cowardly thing is when you're really up against it, you go running for help to the Person you don't believe in. I'll have to do something about that one way or another.
- MADGE You don't make sense to me. What about our Paul?
(Cynthia brings coffee)
- ERNEST Thanks Cynthia. I was there with him in the Casualty ward. They were pretty hard pressed last night. There were two fellows who had got slashed in a fight. The usual drunks and a ghastly car crash. A young woman who'd taken an overdose. They were using a stomach pump on her. And half the time Paul was yelling and screaming.
- MADGE Why didn't they look after him? It's a disgrace.
- ERNEST They were doing all they could. But they were under-staffed. Paul wasn't the worst on their hands by a long chalk. Then Mr. Carter turned up.
- GEOFFREY You mean he'd come all that way?
- ERNEST He hadn't even stopped for a bite. He'd driven straight there.
- GEOFFREY What could he do anyway?
- ERNEST There was Paul lying there dripping with sweat, retching and groaning. Mr. Carter began talking.
- MADGE Well?
- ERNEST I suppose it was a kind of praying. More like wrestling, all-in wrestling with the devil himself. No holds barred. Then he'd be quiet for a while. Not a sound except for Paul's heavy breathing and muttering. Then our Paul began to talk. Just odd words to start with. Then a steady stream. Then a flood. It all came out. He's been on hard drugs steady for the last three weeks. Visits to his Auntie and all that were just a blind to keep us quiet. One thing he kept repeating 'It was my pride tripped me up. My stinking pride. I was too cocksure. Thought I knew it all myself.' Then, just as it began to get light somewhere a cock crowed. Mr. Carter pulled a Bible out of his pocket, and read the bit where Peter denied his Master three times, and how the cock crowed, and he went out and wept bitterly. So did Paul. I tell

ERNEST
(*Contd*) you, in that bare, ugly room, I knew Christ's presence. Then at last there was peace. Paul lay back and once he almost smiled. Then Mr. Carter started talking again. This time it was about the farm, how one of the cows had had trouble bearing her calf, and they'd been out in the night helping her. 'Just like you have me,' said Paul and he smiled again. Mr. Carter went on telling him about his old friends at the farm, and the plans for new building and all else. Then when Paul was beginning to feel drowsy, Mr. Carter started praying again. This time he prayed for forgiveness.

GEOFFREY For Paul.

CYNTHIA For us, I hope.

ERNEST No. You've both got it wrong. He was praying for forgiveness for himself. 'Forgive me, Lord,' he kept saying. 'I was a blind fool to let him go so soon. I thought we'd done a pretty good job with him. That he was ready to face the world. Ready for his own home. I was wrong. Deadly wrong. He'd had a mighty deliverance but he didn't know properly yet what he was called to do and to be.' 'Forgive us all, Lord,' he kept saying, 'and give us another chance.' When morning came and our Paul was sleeping quietly, Carter and I strolled out into the sunlight. We took some deep breaths of air. He looked pretty well done in. I tried to tell him I was grateful, but he just shook me by the hand and said, 'Don't bother to say thank you. Let's all have another go, shall we? Let's do it right this time. All of us.' I think I'll have another cup, Cynthia.

(*Long Pause*)

ELAINE I think I'd better be going now.

ERNEST Alright, Elaine. Yes. You'd probably better go. Mr. Carter did have one message for you. He seems to know you fairly well. 'Tell her,' he said, 'We're ready for her when she's ready for us.' Just that.

ELAINE Well, I'll be off. Good luck. (*Exit*)

MADGE Are you going to let her get away with it like that? Good luck — to the home she's wrecked, to the shop she's turned into a whorehouse and a dope den, to us who she's mocked and insulted, even stolen your money, Ernest, robbed your safe, made a fool of you and all of us.

ERNEST You can pipe down, Madge.

MADGE Pipe down! You're forgetting yourself, Ernest. Pipe down indeed! Now let me tell you . . .

ERNEST No, Madge. No more tirades. No more throwing your weight around.

- MADGE Oh, so the worm's turning at last, is he? Taken in by that miserable apology for a son and that religious crank Carter. Well, you can't take me in, any of you, I can tell you. Crises may come and crises may go, but I'm mistress here.
- ERNEST *(Shouts at her – a terrible roar such as he has never used before.)* Madge! You're going to learn to listen and do what you're told.
- MADGE Well . . . this is the end. As if I haven't taken enough already. First Paul, then her, and even Cynthia's gone all frosty and holy this morning. And now you, raving like a lunatic. They should have kept you in the hospital too, it seems to me.
- ERNEST Madge! Will you shut up?
- MADGE No I won't shut up. Geoffrey, you're my son. The one person I can turn to. The only decent and honourable member of the family left. I can rely on you son, I know it. Stand up for your old mother now, if nobody will.
- (Geoffrey looks from Madge to Cynthia and back again)*
- GEOFFREY *(Torn)* What? I . . .
- MADGE Well, have you lost your tongue all of a sudden?
- CYNTHIA You must tell her, Geoffrey, if you don't you'll stay a coward for the rest of your life, just like your father . . .
- ERNEST I beg your pardon?
- CYNTHIA . . . like your father was.
- MADGE Stop interrupting and don't you dare talk to my son like that -- nor my husband. There's never been any secrets between me and our Geoffrey, has there son? There's nothing he can tell me that I don't already know. Is there?
- GEOFFREY I'm sorry, Mother. There is something you don't know. Elaine didn't take the money from Dad's safe. Nor did Paul.
- MADGE Nonsense. How do you know?
- GEOFFREY Because I did. I took it.
- ERNEST You what?
- MADGE I don't believe it. I simply refuse to believe it. There's no need to defend your brother. Nor her. They're not worth it. We all know you're the steady one – reliable, honest . . . *(Less certain)* You must be . . . You always were . . . Geoffrey!
- GEOFFREY *(Producing money from his pockets)* I'm sorry, Mother, It's no good. I knew where you kept the key of the safe, Dad. I stole the money – all of it. In fact I took this only this morning. *(He hands wad of notes to Ernest)*

- MADGE You . . . you traitor! *(She breaks)* You'll never know what you've done to me. *(She sobs)* You've taken away everything.
(Loud wails. Ernest goes to her)
- MADGE Don't touch me.
- ERNEST Withdrawal symptoms, my dear. That's all it is. Just like Paul last night. The habits of a lifetime broken – and it hurts.
(Madge sobs louder)
- MADGE It's all . . . all hollow . . . isn't it? Always has been. One son an addict. The other a . . . a thief. A husband . . .
- ERNEST Who's just looked on. A spectator. Too blind and cowardly to fight.
- MADGE And I'm . . . I'm . . . a lot of froth on the beer and no body to it. The biggest fraud of all. Elaine has proved her point. Here's the woman who was going to sit on the Bench and judge others. *(A long pause)* So there's nothing left, is there?
- ERNEST But there is. Last night in that hospital room, Christ was there. I knew it. Paul knew it too.
(A long pause and then Madge goes to fetch her coat and handbag)
- ERNEST And where are you going?
- MADGE *(Snaps)* Where do you think?
(Ernest takes her coat and helps her on with it. Cynthia hands her her bag)
- MADGE I shouldn't have spoken like that. That's the old me. *(Pause)* I'm going to the hospital to see my son. *(She stops at the door)* After all, we've got a lot in common.

CURTAIN