

Nothing Personal

A play in two acts

By Eric Presland

1979

07444-311-695

homopromos@gmail.com

Cast

Squirrel	A gay man in his twenties, long hair, a vestigial hippy. Soft spoken, unassertive, caring
Norton	A gay man in his 40s. "Straight gay", traditional masculine behaviours. People respect and trust him, but they don't like him.
Julian	Very middle class, slightly older. Think Peter Bowles
Alex	19, the baby of the Switchboard, lover of Nev.
Nev	A no-nonsense Geordie, a little older. He works as a telephone engineer, and wears working clothes. He feels a little at odds with the other middle-class switchboard volunteers.
Talbot	Lesbian in her 30s, confident, assertive. A little cynical. Squirrel's best friend.
Carol	One Nature's social workers. Eternally optimistic, unable to see that people and life can be shitty.

Set

Scenes 1	A functional meeting room, run down.
Scene 2	The cubby-hole which is the Switchboard operating room. Very Claustrophobic
Scene 3	SQUIRREL's shabby chaotic living room
Scene 4	The meeting room again

Time

The mid to late 1970s

ACT ONE

Scene One

[A small bare meeting room. Two women, TALBOT and CAROL sit in chairs back to back in the centre. Round the walls sit four men, ALEX, NEV, JULIAN and SQUIRREL. ALEX and NEV sit close – they are an item. The only other chair in the room is occupied by NORTON. It is His Chair. They all watch the women in the centre. There is a pause of at least twenty seconds.]

TALBOT: Just take your time. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to.

[Pause]

TALBOT: If you prefer to speak to a man, there'll be one on tomorrow evening.

[Shorter pause]

TALBOT: We're always here, eight till ten-thirty, every night. If you can't find the right words now, you've got our number. You've been very brave ringing at all. Ringing a strange number to talk to people you don't know. That takes courage. But now you've done it once, you can do it again. We're always here to help in whatever way we can.

[Pause]

TALBOT: If you'd prefer to speak to someone in person, there's a befriending group. That's open between seven and nine on Thursdays and Sundays, at 46, Walton Street, just off Oxford Road

[Short pause]

TALBOT: Or you can talk to me.

[Short pause]

TALBOT: That's what I'm here for.

[Short pause]

TALBOT: My name's Talbot.

[Short pause.]

TALBOT: I'm sorry about the noise in the background. It's the rain on the roof. We've got an attic window and it's made of Perspex, and when it's raining you can hardly hear yourself think.

[Short pause. SQUIRREL smiles, NORTON raises an eyebrow at this flight of fancy.]

TALBOT: Isn't it awful, this rain? I had a horrible time getting here. I had to wait over half an hour for the bus, just standing there while it was pissing down. I'm absolutely soaked. I'm just sitting here by the phone, dripping little puddles on the floor. The whole place will be flooded in five minutes.

[Laughs. Pause. Second thoughts.]

TALBOT: That was only a joke. It's not that bad. Is it raining there, where you are?

[Pause]

TALBOT: All I can say, really, is that if you're gay and worried about it, or frightened of it, you don't have to be. You're not on your own. There are thousands and thousands of gay people all around you, all leading perfectly happy, sane, well-adjusted lives.

[Pause]

TALBOT: You could be one of them.

[Pause]

TALBOT: I want help you. That's why I'm on the end of the phone.

[Pause]

TALBOT: If it's something else that's worrying you, we can find a solution. I mean, you can find a solution, with our support. There's no problem that can't be solved. Somehow.

[Pause. From now on TALBOT is becoming increasingly desperate.]

TALBOT: I'm gay, and I've never been happier. It was such a relief to discover that, and meet new friends. I have a little girl called Tommie who's nine years old, and I share a house with a lot of friends who are gay, and I have a regular girlfriend, but she's away right now with her other girlfriend in Cardiff, but that's cool. I'm a social worker too which is rewarding sometimes, but often you feel you're beating your head against a brick wall.

[Pause]

TALBOT: I'm trying to help you.

[Pause]

TALBOT: Well, that's all there is to say about me, really. I'm thirty-ish though I don't look it.

[NORTON waves and signals this is a no-no. Signals to cut the conversation.]

TALBOT: My friends say I talk too much.

[Pause]

TALBOT: How do you feel about what I'm saying? You don't have to say anything, just tap on the receiver if you want me to go on talking. Just a tap to let me know you're still listening and you're still there.

[Pause]

Are you there?

[Pause]

TALBOT: I'm on every other Friday, if you want to talk to me again. That means my next one is on the sixteenth. My name's Talbot.

[NORTON again waves that this is a no-no. TALBOT pointedly turns away from him.]

TALBOT: Talbot. I know it's a stupid name but my given name's Fenella, and what kind of name is that? Everyone kept saying *[Fenella Fielding in 'Carry on Screaming']* "Do you mind if I shmoke?" So now everyone calls me Talbot instead. I insist on it.

[Pause]

TALBOT: Maybe I'll get around to changing it legally some day, but it seems such a hassle. A name's really part of you, isn't it?

[Pause]

TALBOT: What's your name? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.

[Pause]

TALBOT: I'm sorry, I can't think of anything else to say. I'm going to go quiet for a bit, so you can just think about things. Just say anything when you feel like it. But it doesn't matter if you don't feel like it.

[Pause.]

TALBOT: I'm still here.

[Pause. She is in tears now.]

CAROL: Look, can we break it off here, Norton? I've got to say something by now. Or ring off.

NORTON: OK. Break there. Concentration's gone.

[TALBOT bursts out crying fully. She goes and puts her arms round SQUIRREL, who comforts her.]

TALBOT: *[Softly]* I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

SQUIRREL: Don't be.

TALBOT: I couldn't think of anything else to say.

SQUIRREL: You said it all. *[He is in tears as well.]*

NORTON: *[Brisk]* Okay, comments, anyone?

[He looks at the others, who look at their feet, obviously embarrassed at the emotion.]

NORTON: What did it feel like on the other end?

CAROL: *[Slowly]* I'm sure I would have said something. Or put the phone down. You couldn't just sit there soaking it all up like that.

NORTON: Why not?

CAROL: It was all too much. I mean, it was really strong. Sort of powerful, reaching out like that. You'd have to respond or reject it.

NORTON: Was there any point where you wanted to put the phone down?

CAROL: No. Oh yes – just one. When she said about ringing back to talk to someone else. It was the second time she said it. Felt like she was trying to get rid of me.

NORTON: Anyone else feel that?

[There is still a reluctance to speak.]

NORTON: Julian?

JULIAN: I think if I was that scared of speaking, I mean, so shit scared I couldn't say anything at all, then I'd be really frightened when I was asked all those questions, like what's your name? I think I might have put the phone down then. Panicked.

TALBOT: I couldn't think of anything else to say.

NORTON: You've got to. You've simply got to. Two little slips, you see, and you've got two points where you might have lost him.

SQUIRREL: *[Pointed]* Or her.

NORTON: *[Perfunctory]* Or her, of course. Sorry.

CAROL: But I really didn't feel it that much. I mean, mainly I felt really warm and positive. Like it was someone I could trust. I think by the time we got to that bit I'd have trusted her enough to ride over it. And even when she was looking for a response, she came in afterwards and said it didn't matter if she didn't get one. It wasn't really a slip.

NORTON: Anyone else?

[Pause]

NEV: It's a bit middle class, innit?

- NORTON: What do you mean, middle class? Class has nothing to do with Switchboard.
- NEV: Oh yeah? If it was an ordinary working class lad like me ringing up. Or lass, okay - I'd be a bit put off. I'd think it wasn't for the likes of me. It's the words she uses. And those social worker tones.
- TALBOT: I couldn't think of anything else to say. And I can't help being a social worker.
- NORTON: Do you remember any of the words?
- NEV: Well, all that stuff about her girlfriend's girlfriend and living in a commune.
- SQUIRREL: *[Getting tetchy]* It's not a commune!
- NEV: That's what it sounds like. Reading *Spare Rib* while you're stirring the wok. Not much to do with working up at Longbridge.
- ALEX: Hey, easy, love. She's doing her best.
- NEV: He asked for comments, didn't he? I'm being honest.
- SQUIRREL: We don't know that the caller was working in a factory.
- NORTON: He might have been.
- SQUIRREL: Or she.
- CAROL: Look, the caller doesn't exist. This is role-play. We made her – or him – up. It was just me sitting in that chair. I might as well have been an orc!
- NORTON: It is true we're mainly middle-class.
- SQUIRREL: And sexist.

- NORTON: I don't think that's fair. We've got six women volunteers and two women's nights.
- SQUIRREL: And how do women callers feel on the other five nights?
- NORTON: I wish we could get round it. Class and gender.
- NEV: *[To ALEX, aside]* No he don't. He likes his own kind.
- JULIAN: I'm sorry, I'm not going to apologise for something I have no control over.
- NORTON: We could change how we recruit, maybe.
- SQUIRREL: How many times have you said that?
- NORTON: Can we get back to training, please? Dealing with silent callers. Put yourself in the position of a silent caller. You're sixteen and being picked on at school. You've never spoken to anyone. Or you're a married man who's seen a sticker in a cottage. You've bottled it up for twenty years. Anyone in those positions has gone through days, maybe months, working themselves up to that call. They need all the assurance they can get, and, yes, they can sop it up, all the assurance you can give, and more. A caller like that is going to be self-obsessed, right? *[To CAROL]* You ever had a silent call?
- CAROL: No. They've always rung off straight away.
- NORTON: Probably wanted to talk to a man. But sometimes you can hook them in the first few seconds, with the right telephone manner. I couldn't help feeling you were a bit brisk to start with, Talbot.
- TALBOT: Sorry, Norton.
- NORTON: The pauses were good. Very good. Good pacing, plenty of time to come back.

SQUIRREL: What is this, a theatre review? You're so patronising, Norton.

NORTON: Trainer's job to critique. But you've got to keep going whatever happens, Talbot.

CAROL: We were going for ages.

NORTON: Eight minutes, twenty-five seconds.

CAROL: Is that all? It felt like for ever.

NORTON: I once had a silent call lasted fifty-two minutes. All I heard was crying down the phone.

CAROL: How dreadful. What happened?

NORTON: The crying stopped and he hung up the phone.

SQUIRREL: Or she.

NORTON: I can tell the difference between man and a woman crying.

CAROL: Did they ring back?

NORTON: How should I know? You like to think so, but there's no way to know.

SQUIRREL: So your marathon lost the caller anyway.

NORTON: You do the best you can.

SQUIRREL: Exactly. Talbot did the best she could and it was bloody marvellous. Maybe she is middle class, but she put herself right on the line.

TALBOT: It's okay, Squirrel.

- SQUIRREL: It's not OK. You were really laying yourself out. The caller would know they were talking to a real person. *[To NORTON]* Not some fucking answering machine.
- TALBOT: *[to SQUIRREL]* I don't need protecting. I want to learn. *[To NORTON]* What was wrong?
- NORTON: Not wrong, exactly. But you got carried away. You got too personal. You got involved in the situation and it overwhelmed you. That's why you dried up.
- SQUIRREL: Of course she got bloody personal. How can you avoid it? That's all you've got to offer in cases like that. That's what they want, not some shitty pubs and clubs directory.
- NORTON: Sure that's what they want. But you must keep it under control. All the sympathy you want, yes, but you mustn't get sucked into it, that doesn't help anybody. You've got to pretend to some extent. You can't bleed for everyone, there's too many of them.
- SQUIRREL: How can you 'pretend' involvement?
- NORTON: A psychiatrist does.
- SQUIRREL: We're not bloody shrinks.
- NORTON: But we have to be a bit schizo about it all, nonetheless.
- TALBOT: Thanks. I'll see what I can do.
- NORTON: I'm not getting at you. It's nothing personal.
- TALBOT: I know.
- NORTON: It's just, we've got to provide the best. Nothing else will do. You'll still lose some, but less.
- JULIAN: Can't we get on please? I've got a hot date with an Aston graduate. Can we move to the business part?

NORTON: What's the time?

JULIAN: Quarter to eight.

NORTON: Who's on the rota tonight?

ALEX: I am.

NORTON: We'll get through if we crack on. First – publicity. Anyone heard from Dee?

SQUIRREL: She's in Manchester to see Clare.

NORTON: Has she done it yet?

SQUIRREL: Well if she hasn't, she's had a wasted journey.

[TALBOT and SQUIRREL snigger.]

NORTON: *[Exasperated]* Has she done the poster?

CAROL: She's been very busy.

NORTON: Not so busy she can't go to Manchester for the weekend. It's always the way. How many volunteers do we have? Thirty.

SQUIRREL: Thirty-two.

NORTON: And how many turn up? Look - *[He indicates the small group.]* It doesn't take that long to knock out a poster, for heaven's sake. We need publicity quick. Calls are dropping off.

JULIAN: What about reprinting the stickers?

NORTON: How many have we got left?

ALEX: About five hundred. We took a load a fortnight ago, didn't we, love?

NEV: Did the student towers at Gosta Green.

NORTON: We had five hundred left at the last meeting. How many of you have done stickering since?

[Only SQUIRREL puts up his hand.]

NORTON: How do you expect to get calls if you don't sell the service? I covered the city centre about a week ago, but I can't do the whole bloody city.

SQUIRREL: Give me another couple of hundred.

[The phone rings next door. They all freeze.]

NORTON: What's the time?

JULIAN: Five to.

NORTON: Leave it.

ALEX: It's OK, I'll go.

NORTON: We're not open yet.

ALEX: I don't mind.

NORTON: It only encourages people to ring out of hours. Let them ring back.

SQUIRREL: But will they?

NORTON: *[Sighing]* Okay.

[ALEX goes next door]

NORTON: Where were we? Stickers. Has everyone else still got stickers?

[They all nod.]

NORTON: Nobody want any more?

NEV: Oh, give us a few more. I'll shove them around the Sorting Office again. Plenty of pouffy postmen.

ALEX: It's the uniform. Dead sexy.

[They cuddle. Their closeness is an embarrassment to NORTON]

NORTON: Stop that, please. Concentrate.

TALBOT: I can't help feeling that stickers is a male-biased activity. Most of them go in cottages where men find sex.

NORTON: Carol puts them in women's toilets, she said.

CAROL: Occasionally. Not as a rule.

TALBOT: Women don't cottage.

NORTON: I know that. But they do presumably go to the toilet.

TALBOT: Can't we find other forms of publicity, other ways to reach women?

NORTON: We've got the advert in *Spare Rib*.

TALBOT: I was thinking more of *Woman's Own*.

NORTON: It would cost a fortune.

SQUIRREL: How do you know?

NORTON: It stands to reason. It's a big glossy.

SQUIRREL: Have you asked their advertising department? Have you written to Claire Rayner?

[Re-enter ALEX]

ALEX: It's a bloke on the phone wanting to speak to a woman. I said I'd see if there was one in the building. Do you want to take it, either of you?

NORTON: Men wanting to speak to women – very dodgy.

CAROL: I don't mind.

NORTON: Tell him to call back later. It's only a wanker.

ALEX: He thinks he might be a woman trapped in a man's body.

NORTON: Oh, come on! Oldest trick in the book. Ha! Straight men!

TALBOT: I'll take it.

NORTON: But it's only a wanker.

SQUIRREL: This may surprise you, but wankers are people too.

NORTON: We're not here to provide that sort of service.

TALBOT: Who says I'm going to provide 'that sort of service'?

ALEX: Well, make up your minds one way or the other. I can tell him to call on women's night.

TALBOT/CAROL: No!

TALBOT: I'm coming. *[To NORTON]* Don't worry, I'll log it in the book.

ALEX: Shall I come too?

NORTON: Yes.

TALBOT: No.

[Exit TALBOT. ALEX hesitates, then sits down again with NEV. NORTON is about to protest, but -]

SQUIRREL: We were talking about *Woman's Own*.

NORTON: We haven't got the money.

CAROL: Squirrel's right. No harm in asking, surely?

NORTON: But the posters –

SQUIRREL: We haven't even got a design.

NORTON: But it was agreed –

SQUIRREL: One advert might pull more than all the posters.

NORTON: Waste of time –

SQUIRREL: I propose we make enquiries at *Woman's Own*, and if it won't cost more than the posters, we put an ad in.

NORTON: And how will we pay for the posters?

SQUIRREL: We'll deal with it when we get there. We always find money from somewhere.

NORTON: Where?

SQUIRREL: We hold a benefit or three. What does everyone else think?

NEV: No harm in asking.

ALEX: She turned up for that Switchboard benefit at Digbeth Town Hall.

- NORTON: She's always appearing on *Pebble Mill at One*. Practically lives at the studio.
- NEV: I'll ring them up tomorrow.
- CAROL: What about the local paper? *The Echo*.
- NEV: You must be joking.
- NORTON: Their advertising manager is a born again Christian. "This is a family newspaper."
- NEV: Don't queers have families?
- JULIAN: Please don't use that word.
- NEV: Well, don't they?
- ALEX: I like my in-laws.
- SQUIRREL: They're one of the last newspapers which still publishes the names and addresses of everyone who's convicted of a gay offence.
- NORTON: When the Samaritans had a free page, the editor took out all references to 'gay' and 'lesbian'. Not only will they not give us the time of day, they'd love to see us closed down.
- CAROL: I take it that's a no, then.
- NORTON: *[Brisk]* What's next. Oh, yes. Abusive calls. You had something, Squirrel.
- SQUIRREL: I've been getting some rather strange calls. I checked in the logbook, and the number of hoaxes and abuse calls is definitely rising. Anybody else had the same experience?
- JULIAN: Not that I've noticed.
- SQUIRREL: Carol?

- CAROL: Last Tuesday I took one which was sort of creepy. This bloke rang up asking for information and gay pubs and I gave it to him, and I did all the usual things about checking if it was really what he was calling about, and then suddenly he asked me if I was gay, and I said yes, and he just said, "We'll have you. You'd better watch it." He was really quiet, and when he said it, it was sort of soft and sad. Then he hung up.
- ALEX: I had one about saunas. He had a strong northern accent. He wasn't soft, though. More matter-of-fact, and he just said, "Here's another one for the chop, Charlie," over his shoulder. Like there was a group of them there. Like he wanted me to hear it.
- NEV: You never told me.
- ALEX: Didn't want to worry you.
- SQUIRREL: Well, I've been on seven times in the last month and it's happened nearly every time. Last time I was on, it happened twice.
- CAROL: What's happening?
- NORTON: Seems some nasty bits of work have got the number and passed it around. Probably only psychological, to freak us out. Doubt if they'll attack us here. The front of the shop is fairly solid.
- JULIAN: Come to think of it, I've spotted slogans scrawled over our stickers. I didn't pay any mind to it.
- NORTON: We have no proof of anything.
- SQUIRREL: What gets me is the way you can't tell. Like, it's all so reasonable and just like any other call, and then suddenly something happens, and your stomach just drops.

- NORTON: Too personal again. You see? It's not you that they're shouting at. They don't know you.
- SQUIRREL: It's not the shouting and the 'fucking queer' stuff. It's the way that you start to put out cos you think it's a real call, and then they turn on you. Slap you in the face.
- NEV: I'm going to put a phone extension into here next weekend. You could make out like you were getting the operator to trace calls. That'll scare them shitless.
- ALEX: *[Protesting]* We were going on the Stourbridge Canal. I've hired a boat.
- NORTON: Won't take more than an hour. If you help me.
- CAROL: But you only find out in the last few seconds, and then they ring off. There wouldn't be time to trace a call.
- JULIAN: It might put them off, stop them phoning again.
- NORTON: Do the calls come from phone boxes or private numbers?
- SQUIRREL: Varies. Mainly phone box, I think.
- CAROL: Mine was private.
- NORTON: When's the extension going to be done, Nev?
- NEV: Don't you listen? I told you, I'll do it next weekend. I've still got one or two bits to nick from work. I may not be able to knock them off tomorrow, but I'll try.
- JULIAN: Knock them off?
- NEV: We're sponsored by Post Office Telecommunications, didn't you know?
- NORTON: See what you can do. Sooner the better.

- JULIAN: What about the press? We might frighten them off if we got something in *Peace News* or – what's the anti-Nazi one?
- SQUIRREL: Searchlight.
- CAROL: What's wrong with *Gay News*?
- SQUIRREL: Where should I start...?
- NORTON: If you got a story in any of them, they'd love the free publicity. And they'd think they had us rattled. Sit tight, I say.
- ALEX: Do you really think the National Front read those things?
- NORTON: Why not? Some of us read *Spearhead*. Know thy enemy...
- JULIAN: There must be something more we can do. What about the police?
- SQUIRREL: I'm not having anything to do with the pigs. They'd go through the files and everything. It's just the excuse they've been waiting for.
- NORTON: That's not fair. The police have been very decent to us so far. But even if we went to them, what could they do? There's no evidence. Could be anybody.
- JULIAN: Trace the phone calls?
- NORTON: From public boxes?
- SQUIRREL: It's the National Front, we know it is.
- NORTON: If the police paid a visit to the NF, they'd know they'd got us rattled. And they'd deny all knowledge.
- NEV: I could rig up a cassette recorder. We could tape calls.

ALEX: You could have my cassette recorder. The one you got me for my eighteenth.

NEV: No, that was for you. I even paid for it!

SQUIRREL: No. Switchboard calls are confidential, and we'd have to record every single one.

CAROL: Every single male one.

NEV: There are women in the NF too.

SQUIRREL: If it became known we were recording calls, we might as well shut up shop. And what if someone else got hold of the tapes...

NORTON: What about some headphones so someone could listen in?

NEV: You can have the ones off my stereo, no problem.

NORTON: I think they'll just get fed up with it when they see they're not getting anywhere

[SQUIRREL's sudden realisation of potential danger. He runs to the door.]

SQUIRREL: Talbot!

NORTON: That won't be them. Anyway, she said she wasn't going to co-operate with any wankers.

SQUIRREL: I suppose you're right.

[He hesitates in the doorway]

NORTON: If you go rushing in, you could blow a sensitive call. Sit down.

[SQUIRREL sits down]

NORTON: Anyone else want to comment.

[There's no response. SQUIRREL obviously still worried.]

NORTON: There's nothing you can do.

SQUIRREL: Don't you realise, this is how it's going to be. For all of us, all of the time. And it's going to get worse.

NORTON: Don't be so dramatic. It's five per cent of calls at worst.

SQUIRREL: But it could be any call. We should double up the rota.

NORTON: We don't have enough volunteers.

SQUIRREL: I'll do more shifts, I don't mind.

NORTON: You can't do it all on your own. *[Relents]* Okay, I'll do a ring round. It'll take a bit of time. What about you lot? Julian, you only do one a month?

JULIAN: I have a life. I have a partner.

CAROL: You said you had a hot date –

TALBOT: Some relationships are open, darling.

CAROL: I could never –

TALBOT: You're not a man.

NORTON: Shame you can't rope your partner in.

JULIAN: He has a speech impediment.

SQUIRREL: Lay off, Norton.

NEV: Don't look at me, I'm on nights.

NORTON: Alex?

ALEX: I don't think I can manage more, honestly.

SQUIRREL: *[Accusing] Alex...*

NEV: Well maybe one more wouldn't hurt. Put me down for Friday. Alex?

ALEX: Thursday. *[To NEV]* We're never going to see each other at this rate.

NEV: You can tell me all about it after, in bed.

NORTON: Carol?

CAROL: I'm still a trainee. I have to have someone with me.

NORTON: Could you sit in more?

CAROL: I'll check with Angela.

[Enter TALBOT, obviously upset]

TALBOT: Sorry to interrupt but this is getting heavy. Could you come with me Squirrel, please?

SQUIRREL: Sure.

NORTON: I told you it was a wanker...

TALBOT: Squirrel? *[To others]* See you later.

[They both dash out. The rest are left subdued, thoughtful.]

NORTON: And that's the other thing about this hoax business. Don't give anything away. Don't be abusive, don't co-operate with telewankers, don't give information about cottages, don't give sex education to kids, don't give out any addresses unless you're absolutely sure the caller is OK.

CAROL: We don't do any of that anyway.

NORTON: But be doubly careful with this scare on. And don't arrange to meet anyone on your own. Always in twos.

NEV: No screwing with National Front members.

[They all laugh. The tension relaxes a bit.]

NORTON: No screwing with callers, period. Golden rule, remember?

CAROL: The women always meet in twos.

NORTON: It's for your own protection, the sex thing. In case they get funny. Agreed?

[They all nod]

NORTON: There's only one other thing on my list. I'm glad Squirrel's out of the room. I don't know how you feel about this, but I think we should stop giving out his number.

[The others look surprised.]

NORTON: I don't mean anything by that, and I still think it's OK for absolute emergencies. But at the moment he's the contact for gay students, disabled men, married gays, the gay outdoor club and God knows what else. All the 'problem' calls end up on his doorstep. We must stop using him as a dustbin. He'll burn himself out.

CAROL: Shouldn't he decide how much he can handle?

ALEX: And shouldn't he be here? I don't like talking behind his back.

NORTON: Sometimes people are so close to a situation, they can't see the obvious. And the obvious is, he's exhausted.

NEV: I caught him asleep in the phone room a while back.

CAROL: Who else can do it? Take on the contacts. There's simply not enough people.

NEV: I can't do any of the girl's stuff obviously. Wouldn't want to, eugh!

[A mock shudder of horror. The others laugh.]

NORTON: *[Unamused]* We'll have to refer people to other agencies. Or tell them to ring the National Switchboard.

NEV: Oh, the posh lot in London. I don't trust them. *[To ALEX]* Remember, we met them at that conference in Leeds? Kept trying to tell us what to do.

JULIAN: It's a bit like the local police calling in Scotland Yard. It's an admission of failure.

NORTON: But we can't let him go on. He's the best operator we have, we don't want to lose him.

JULIAN: Are you serious?

NORTON: He does two nights a week on average. He's always on emergency standby if there's a gap in the rota or someone can't turn up for some reason. He's always befriending too. And now he's talking about doing more! He eats, drinks, sleeps, and breathes Switchboard as it is. I don't think he can take it.

CAROL: But he's always done it.

NORTON: I think his work's beginning to suffer. Look at the log book. He's taking it too personally. He's starting to lose his temper.

NEV: Have you talked to him?

NORTON: Not yet.

ALEX: Then we shouldn't even be discussing it. It's not fair.

NEV: *[To NORTON]* You're getting above yourself, lad.

NORTON: I'd like something decided at the next meeting. I'll put it to him before then. Promise. Any other business?

[They shake heads.]

NORTON: In that case, meeting closed at seven-fifty. Excuse me if I rush. Better type this up while it's fresh. Bye all.

[His farewell is business-like and a bit distant. It is clear he is not part of the social group. NORTON exits.]

CAROL: Do you think he will tackle Squirrel?

JULIAN: I wouldn't put money on it.

ALEX: What's he got against Squirrel? I don't understand it.

JULIAN: They founded Switchboard together. That's – what? – five years now. But gradually, whether they know it or not, they've developed their own little – I won't say empires exactly – spheres of influence. Touchy Feely Squirrel and Mr Organiser Norton. I don't know if they always have, but they grate on each other. I reckon Norton feels threatened. They're miles apart politically.

NEV: You know what I reckon? I reckon Squirrel's not the only one needs a break. Anyone else coming to the pub.

ALEX: I can't. I got to go back on the phone. I thought you'd wait for me.

NORTON: Not a hope. Mrs Shufflewick's on tonight.

BLACKOUT

Scene Two

[This overlaps in time with the previous one. The Switchboard room itself, off the meeting room. Very small. There are maps on the wall, notices and pictures; a file of impressive proportions on the table, papers. An impression of purposeful organisation overlaid with laziness and squalor. SQUIRREL and TALBOT rush in from the meeting room, close the door.]

TALBOT: ... in the end I could only get away by saying I was desperate for the loo. Just hold on tight, will you?

SQUIRREL: Sure, sugar.

[TALBOT sits at the phone and picks it up, reaches out for SQUIRREL's hand. He holds it, then comes closer and hugs her while she takes the call.]

TALBOT: Are you still there? No, don't worry. I'm on my own. *[Pause]* Well, if you did, it must have been next door. The walls are very thin. *[Pause]* No, we've been through all that. We don't offer than kind of service, and that's all there is to it. *[Pause]* We have to be very careful. Legally. *[Pause]* But if someone did find out we might well get prosecuted and have to close down. You wouldn't want that, would you? *[Pause]* Of course I want to talk to you, but not about that. I just won't. *[Pause]* No, don't do that, please. Stay and talk to me. Hello? Are you there? Are you there?

[She puts a hand over the mouthpiece and turns to SQUIRREL in desperation.]

TALBOT: He's serious, I swear. He's got a hundred phenobarbital and he says he'll take them if I don't talk him through it while he wanks.

SQUIRREL: You believe him?

TALBOT: Can't afford not to?

SQUIRREL: Christ. *[Decision]* I'll get the call traced on the office number.

[SQUIRREL makes to leave.]

TALBOT: Hello? Yes, I'm still here.

[She signals urgently that SQUIRREL should come back. He runs and holds her again.]

TALBOT: You haven't done – you haven't, have you? Good. *[Pause]* Yes, I'd like to talk. *[Pause]* Let's not go over that again, please. You know I would if I could. *[Pause]* You sound nice as well. *[Pause]* No, I can't do that either. *[Pause]* I don't think there'd be much point in that. I'm perfectly happy as a lesbian and want to stay that way, so I really don't think there'd be much point for either of us. *[Pause]* Of course you can. There are lots of ways to meet people. *[Pause]* Some of them must like you – I mean, I like you, don't I? *[Pause]* Just because I can't do that, doesn't mean I don't like you. *[Pause]* My name's – *[hesitation]* – Lucy, and I've got short curly brown hair *[she hasn't]* and I wear glasses. *[Pause]* I'm thirty or so. *[Pause]* No, please don't do that. Actually I'm fifty-four next birthday. Please, just talk to me a bit more. If I tell you, will you stay on the line? *[Laughs]* I'm sorry, but I really don't know. I haven't worn a bra in years. *[Pause]* Yes, that means I'm not wearing one now either. *[Pause]* It's just a baggy old sweater – no, don't start that again. It's brown. My girlfriend knitted it for me and it's the first time she tried knitting a sweater and she got the wrong size and then it went lumpy in the wash – no, no, don't – hello? Hello?

[She puts her hand over the receiver again.]

TALBOT: He's got the top off the bottle. I heard him take the top off the bottle. What do I do?

SQUIRREL: I don't know, I don't know. Let me go to the other room..

TALBOT: Don't leave me. *[Into phone]* Hello? Hello? Don't go away....

[A longer pause. The caller is more confident of his power]

TALBOT: *[Miserably, as flat as possible]* They're red with white frilly edges. *[Pause]* No, nylon. Look you don't have to do this, there are lots of ways to meet people. *[Pause]* There are clubs you can go to, or answer ads in magazines. Or there are dating agencies? Have you thought about a gay dating agency? Or counselling services – have you heard of an organisation called FRIEND? You can meet and talk through your problems. *[Pause]* No, I can't meet you. All I can do is talk to you. But I can help you if you'll just listen for a few minutes. We can help you, because I think you're looking at the wrong problem. The problem lies somewhere – Hello? Hello?

[SQUIRREL attempts to extricate himself, to go to the other phone, but TALBOT holds him tight.]

TALBOT: Don't, please. Hello? *[Pause]* Yes, I'm still here. *[Dully]* How many have you taken? Wait. Don't take any more, please...

[SQUIRREL signals 'How Many?'; TALBOT signals 'Five'.]

TALBOT: OK, OK, I'll do it. What can I say? *[Pause]* Like I said, red, with white frills. *[Pause]* You're right, they're silk. They feel really soft and silky next to my skin. *[Pause]* Is it? Good. I guess it's getting really big and stiff *[Pause]* And throbbing, of course. Slowly does it. That's right, smooth and gentle. Just think of that red nylon – silk – against my skin. *[Pause]* Yes, they are. Very big. Big and white and milky. Imagine you're burying your head in them. Smell the perfume. Just think... take your time... slow and easy... oh, yes, isn't that nice? Does it feel good? Yes... Take your time... *[Pause]* 38... 38C...

[The door opens and CAROL comes in. SQUIRREL signals to her to go out, too late.]

CAROL: They've finished the meeting. I came to see if –

TALBOT: Hello? Hello? Are you there?

SQUIRREL: What the fuck do you mean, coming in like that?

CAROL: I'm sorry.

SQUIRREL: You know the bloody rules. You knock and wait.

[TALBOT hangs up.]

TALBOT: Only a voice... only a stupid old voice...

[She starts to tremble violently, then collapses in uncontrollable sobs.]

SQUIRREL: See what you've done? Didn't you see the red light?

CAROL: It was green, I swear. I'm sure it was green. *[Curious]*
Pick up the phone.

[SQUIRREL reaches over it and picks it up. CAROL looks outside, then comes back.]

CAROL: I was right. There must be a connection gone. It's still on green.

SQUIRREL: Fucking Nev. Bits of wire and biscuit tins. Bloody useless. Bloody useless load of shit. Bloody Post Office.

CAROL: What do you expect from a monopoly?

TALBOT: Ssh. He'll fix it. It'll only take a day.

SQUIRREL: We lost him.

TALBOT: Only a wanker. Shh... *[They cradle each other]*

SQUIRREL: Only a wanker with five barbs inside him and ninety-five to go.

CAROL: Christ, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I thought you'd finished.

TALBOT: It's not your fault.

SQUIRREL: Just keep an eye on *The Echo* for the next few days.

TALBOT: He's probably ringing the Samaritans by now. They were probably only Smarties.

SQUIRREL: If we're lucky.

CAROL: Why didn't you get it traced?

TALBOT: I wanted Squirrel here, so I did that first. It was my fault. I was selfish.

SQUIRREL: No, you were bloody marvellous.

CAROL: Do you want to go now? I can take over now. You both look like you need a coffee/

SQUIRREL: We can do tonight?

CAROL: [*Nervous, remembering NORTON*] Haven't you done enough?

SQUIRREL: I'd like to have a chat with Talbot. There won't be much chance this week. And I've got the stats here to do as well. Look, why don't we swap and you do Wednesday or Saturday?

CAROL: Saturday's out, I'm afraid... I could Wednesday, I suppose... Yeah, sure. Hey, I can watch *All About Eve* tonight with Angela. I've never seen it all through.

[*She makes for the door. Bad Bette Davis*]

CAROL: "Fasten your seat belts and get ready for trouble". Bye.

[CAROL exits.]

SQUIRREL: *[After]* Enjoy the movie. *[To himself]* Might help you get the lines right.

TALBOT: I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.

SQUIRREL: Why? You were great, Nothing else you could have done.

TALBOT: You're a real sweetie, know that?

SQUIRREL: I'm pretty damn good, though I say it myself.

TALBOT: And so modest with it.

SQUIRREL: You know what I'd like right now?

TALBOT: What?

SQUIRREL: Game of Scrabble.

TALBOT: *[Laughing]* Idiot!

SQUIRREL: No seriously. I just fancy one. I haven't had an evening off for weeks.

TALBOT: What are you doing Wednesday?

SQUIRREL: Switchboard.

TALBOT: Oh no you're not. Carol, remember?

SQUIRREL: Nor I am. Nothing, then.

TALBOT: In that case you are going to come and have dinner with me, when I will play you Vivaldi –

SQUIRREL: I hate Vivaldi.

TALBOT: It's good for you

SQUIRREL: *[Small child]* Awww...

TALBOT: OK, the heavy metal version. And God help your poor ears. And I'll stuff you with a veggie Quiche, no Lorraine, but with real cream, till it comes out of your ears, and ply you with strong liquor, and then, when you're falling into a stupor –

SQUIRREL: Have your wicked way with me?

TALBOT: I shall beat the pants off you at Scrabble.

SQUIRREL: Sounds wonderful. What time?

TALBOT: Seven?

SQUIRREL: Dinner jacket?

TALBOT: If you like.

SQUIRREL: I think you look great in a dinner jacket.

TALBOT: Then I will wear it. As long as you wear that nice sarong.

SQUIRREL: Deal. *[Pause while they enjoy the quiet.]* I hope it's a quiet night tonight.

TALBOT: Don't say things like that.

[The phone rings.]

TALBOT: I told you so. You jinxed it.

[She goes to answer it. SQUIRREL motions her to sit down.]

SQUIRREL: Hello, Gay Switchboard. Can I help you? Oh, hang on a second...

[He sorts through the files.]

SQUIRREL: Well, there's not much really. A couple of pubs, neither of them very inspiring. The better of the two is *The Dog and Partridge*. The other one's like something out of the 50s. Knock twice and ask for Dicky. Nothing. *The D & P*, as those in the know call it, is near the clock tower. Do you know where that is? Oh. Where are you now? Well, straight ahead of you is the Co-op, right? And there's a little alley down the side of it. If you go down there you can cut through to the Square where the Clock Tower is, and on the top left hand corner of the square is the High Street. The *D & P* is on the left hand side of the High Street. Have you got that?

[Pause. He mouths 'Pips' at Talbot.]

Hello, yes. Still here. Well, the other one is rent and a bit violent at times, which is OK if you like that sort of thing but I wouldn't recommend it to a newbie. In some ways you'd be better getting on a train over here because the scene's much better. They're every half an hour. 72p I think. The fares are shite these days. *[Pause]* Well, give it a try, and if it's not much cop come on over to us, and give us another ring.

What are you doing in a dump like that? Really. I had a cousin did Applied Maths there. The Gaysoc does really good discos on Friday nights. You know, heavy. Sabbath, Deep Purple, stuff like that. *[Pause]* Sure you can. You can dance to anything if you set your mind to it. It's out of term now, of course.

[He signals 'pips' again.]

Hello again. No, I'm still here, I'm growing roots. Give us a bell tomorrow and let us know how it went. It's a bloke

called Julian. Well, I hope you get in, good luck with the interview. And if you do, I'll see you at the discos next term. Sometimes we bring a coach over.

[He puts the phone down.]

Run out of change. Nice lad.

TALBOT: What a charmer.

SQUIRREL: I'm cool with married men and teenage boys.

TALBOT: You *flirt* with them.

SQUIRREL: *[Sanctimonious]* Flirting is a very important weapon in the volunteer's armoury.

TALBOT: I hate doing married men. I'm always thinking about the poor wife he's keeping in the dark. Women with kids I'm fine.

SQUIRREL: I'm not good with trannies. It's the kind of women they want to dress up like which gets me. They all want to look like Mrs Slocombe in *Are You Being Served?* Either that or Margaret Thatcher.

TALBOT: We all have some that we're better at than others.

SQUIRREL: Not according to Norton. We've all got to be bloody perfect.

TALBOT: I thought you liked him

SQUIRREL: Not since he got this bee in his bonnet about professionalism and applying for grants. We're not professionals. All we have to offer is who we are. And he's so bloody sexist.

TALBOT: *[Wanting to be reasonable]* Ye-es.

SQUIRREL: And he can't even see it. "Women's night is Tuesday - so don't come bothering me with your girly problems."

TALBOT: That's unfair. He's been very supportive of lesbian line.

SQUIRREL: So he can forget about you.

TALBOT: Poor old Norton. Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't.

SQUIRREL: How's the lesbian line idea coming along.

TALBOT: Slowly. Trouble is, this city has too many gay girls and not enough lesbians. "Ooh, it's such an aggressive, nasty word!"

[The phone rings.]

SQUIRREL: I'll get it.

[He picks the phone up.]

SQUIRREL: Hello, Gay Switchboard, can I help you? *[He tenses up.]* No, this isn't that kind of service. No, there's no women on tonight. No, you can't. *[Shouts]* Which part of 'no' don't you understand

[He slams the phone down.]

TALBOT: Squirrel?

SQUIRREL: Straight men. I'm getting sick of it. Nothing but wankers and sexist bastards looking for cheap fucks.

TALBOT: I could have handled that.

SQUIRREL: You've done one already, you've had enough shit tonight.

TALBOT: *[Firmly]* Squirrel, I don't need you to protect me. Don't tell me what to do.

SQUIRREL: I should have asked you. I'm very tired.

TALBOT: Sure.

SQUIRREL: I feel – drained. You know? *[Yawns]* I'd better get on with the stats.

[He turns to a large log book. Opens it. Reads]

SQUIRREL: "Woman wanting to talk to somebody. Told her to ring tomorrow." Norton. It's rubbish!

TALBOT: He has his good calls too.

SQUIRREL: That woman might have been desperate with loneliness, she might have been terrified of her bloke coming to beat her up. She might – anything.

TALBOT: She might have wanted to talk to a woman.

SQUIRREL: I can imagine her sitting there trapped in her little council hutch, couple of kids, eaten up with misery. Aching for any contact. "Ring back tomorrow."

TALBOT: You can't take it all on your shoulders. *[She strokes him affectionately.]* They're not broad enough. Rather thin little shoulders, I'd say. Puny.

SQUIRREL: They're not puny. *[Laughs, poses]* They're slender, delicate, graceful.

TALBOT: I know that, and you know that, but does anyone else know that?

SQUIRREL: That would be telling. *[Looks at the entry again. With disgust:]* "Ring back tomorrow."

TALBOT: Norton keeps this place going. He raises the money, fills the rota, gets new volunteers. Don't knock him.

SQUIRREL: He's a hypocrite.

TALBOT: He's only concerned about service standards. Don't take it all so personally. *[Pause]* You know, what you need is a holiday.

SQUIRREL: Fat chance!

TALBOT: I think you should just drop out of switchboard for a couple of weeks. Yeah, drop everything else too. Take off round the country. Go hitching. Enjoy yourself.

SQUIRREL: Nowhere to stay.

TALBOT: There's always places to stay. What about other switchboards? Must be operators could put you up. You're just making excuses.

SQUIRREL: I could do with a break.

TALBOT: Then do it.

SQUIRREL: But who would take care of –

TALBOT: Don't give me that tired old 'I am indispensable' routine. No-one is indispensable, darling. Park that ego. There's nothing here which can't wait. Nothing. *[Pause]* Except some coffee.

[She exits]

SQUIRREL: *[Calling after her]* White, no sugar.

TALBOT: I know.

[The phone rings. TALBOT hovers.]

SQUIRREL: I can take a call, you know. *[She still hovers]*

SQUIRREL: Hello. Gay Switchboard, can I help you?

[Long pause. A huge weariness comes over him as he signals 'Hoax']

SQUIRREL: Gay Switchboard here. We're a group of gay people and lesbians who offer confidential information and advice on all things to do with being gay. Homosexual. *[Pause]* Yes, I'm gay. *[Pause]* The same way as anyone else. *[Pause]* Well if you want more details, I suggest you ask your Dad. I'm sure I saw him sucking cock in the town hall toilets. And if you can't do that, try it among yourselves. *[Pause]* If you could ask your friend to stop giggling in the background, perhaps I could hear what you're saying. Not that I give a flying fuck what you're saying, because you're a stupid adolescent with a mental age of two and nobody in their right mind, male or female, would want sex with a stinking, halitosis-breath, acne-ridden little turd like you, not even after your balls have dropped, so kindly put the phone down and FUCK OFF.

[He slams the phone down so hard, TALBOT fears it may be broken. Towards the end of the call, she has gone to the rota pinned on the wall and crossed SQUIRREL's name off.]

SQUIRREL: What are you doing?

TALBOT: I've crossed your name off the rota.

SQUIRREL: You can't do that.

TALBOT: I just have.

SQUIRREL: What will Norton say? It leaves him in the shit.

TALBOT: He's got time to find replacements.

SQUIRREL: But what about the scare?

TALBOT: Scare? What scare?

SQUIRREL: You know. The creepy calls. The Front calls.

TALBOT: Oh that scare! You're exaggerating.

SQUIRREL: We agreed to double up on the rota. I offered.

TALBOT: You always offer. And now I've un-offered you. I'm not having you crack up on me. I hate ill people.

[Phone rings.]

SQUIRREL: Hello, Gay –

[He holds the phone away from him and winces. Puts it down again. Takes a cigarette. His hands are shaking badly.]

TALBOT: What was that?

SQUIRREL: Those kids again. "Fucking queer bastard". Et cetera.

TALBOT: *[Taking his hands]* They're only kids on the phone...

[Gradually he stops shaking.]

TALBOT: I'll get the coffee.

[She exits. SQUIRREL opens the log book and starts to make up statistics from it on a table. He pauses to read the odd entry. Suddenly he jumps up again, angry, and puts his name back on the rota. Pauses and puts it down again a couple of times more for good measure. The phone rings again.]

SQUIRREL: Hello, Gay Switchboard. *[Sudden, total concentration]*
And how long have you been feeling like this? *[Pause]*
That's a long time. But this is the first time you've – well, you've done the right thing. *[Pause]* Yeah, I know exactly how you feel. Feels pretty lonely, doesn't it. I used to be exactly like you. You're not the only one, see? There are thousands and thousands of people feeling the same sort of thing. They get over it and meet people and lead happy lives. *[Pause]*

You couldn't? Why not? All it needs is confidence. Once you've met a few people, you'll feel better about going out and so on. We can help you make friends, take you around so you're not thrown in at the deep end...

[The lights fade and return to indicate the passage of time. Perhaps a wall clock indicates ten minutes have passed.]

SQUIRREL: ... Yes, I can see that would be a problem. *[Pause]* Could you tell them? Do you know how they'd react? What do they say when they see us on television? *[Pause]* No, I wasn't really thinking of Larry Grayson. Are you like Larry Grayson, you don't sound like him. Well, there you are then. *[Pause]* I'm not suggesting you rush it, telling your parents is tricky... *[Pause]* Why should they suspect? Have you got any reason to think they do? *[Pause]* A lot of people don't get married till they're well into their thirties. A lot of people never get married at all. *[Pause]* They keep badgering you about it... How would you feel about leaving home? It would make life easier. *[Pause]* Well, how old are you? *[Pause]* Most people would have left by – *[Pause]* I see. But sometimes you have to think of yourself. Is what I'm saying any use to you?

[Lights fade and return again.]

SQUIRREL: No, I really wouldn't advise that. It's a really nasty treatment, and the success rate is very low. All it does is stop you behaving like that, doesn't stop your feelings. *[Pause]* There are no 'cures'. Cure you from what? It's not an illness.

[There is a very soft knock at the door.]

SQUIRREL: No, it's just the roof creaking. We're in a very old building. Don't worry, nobody can hear us. What were we saying? Oh yes. Do you feel ill? Are you covered in spots or lumps or something? Does your mind feel ill? You can think for yourself, can't you? You've got a good job, good

prospects... You don't get uncontrollable fits. So where are you ill? *[Pause]* Of course I'm right. Yes, you are different, but only in that one thing, which isn't so very different at all. And there's lots of people who are different in the same way, if you'll only give yourself the chance to meet them. We've got a Gay Centre in this city, did you know that?

[Lights fade and come back again. Another fifteen minutes have passed.]

SQUIRREL: So there's lots going on. Would you like me to tell you where the Gay Centre is? *[Pause]* Oh you wouldn't have to do that. I could come in with you and show you around, sort of hold your hand – not literally, of course! *[Pause]* Would you like to meet someone first and have a talk about it? *[Pause]* I know it's not easy on the phone. *[Pause]* Yes, I'd meet you. I don't think you're a failure. *[Pause]* Squirrel. Yes, I know. It started as a sort of nickname but then it stuck. I never use my real name any more. Roger? OK, Roger, how do you feel about meeting up in a pub? - Oh sorry, you don't drink, do you? What about a café or something? No, not a gay café, we don't have that here. *[Pause]* If anybody does see us, we're just a couple of blokes having a cup of tea in a café. Where's the harm in that? *[Pause]* OK, I could meet you outside, we could walk around a bit. *[Pause]* What do you mean 'odd'? I haven't got two heads or anything....

[Lights fade and come back again. The call has been going for nearly an hour.]

SQUIRREL: No, we don't do that. Sorry. *[Pause]* Don't you see, meeting up in private houses lays us open to – no, there's nothing wrong with you, you have a lovely voice. Of course I like you. *[Pause]* Yes, I understand how you feel. *[Pause]* There's really no need to cry, it's not hopeless. *[Longer pause]* Is that really the only way? I have to tell you, I'll be inviting someone else. Another Switchboard volunteer, a friend of mine, so you can meet both of us. Is that OK?...

[Lights fade again and return only a short time later.]

SQUIRREL: So you've got the address. You'll know you're nearly there when you pass the chip shop. OK, I look forward to meeting you. *[Pause]* Stupid of me. When, yes, when! *[Pause]* Well, I do quite a lot of work here, which means most evenings are tied up.

[Pause. He is flicking through the Switchboard diary. It is difficult to find an evening.]

Yes I know you work. What about weekends? *[Pause]* Couldn't you skip church once? Or the garden centre? *[Pause]* No, I didn't mean that, of course I want to meet you. *[Sighs]* What about Wednesday? Shall we say Wednesday? Eight o'clock?

[He finally puts the phone down. He is wrung out.]

SQUIRREL: *[Calls]* You can come in now.

TALBOT: *[Entering with coffees]* It'll be stone cold by now.

SQUIRREL: I love cold coffee. Preferably with skin on top.

TALBOT: Long call...

SQUIRREL: Befriending. About thirty – he said – lives with parents... blah blah. Just needs someone to sweep the junk out of his head.

TALBOT: Don't tell me, let me guess. You arranged to meet him Wednesday.

SQUIRREL: It was the only night free.

TALBOT: It wasn't free. What about me? What about quiche and scrabble?

SQUIRREL: I didn't have much choice.

TALBOT: You had the choice to say no. To say, just for once, I'm important. My best friend Talbot's important. How many have you got on your plate now?

SQUIRREL: I can't remember.

TALBOT: Ten, at least.

SQUIRREL: Never ten

TALBOT: Count them up. You are hopeless.

SQUIRREL: He only wants to meet someone

TALBOT: Then why can't he meet someone else?

SQUIRREL: Because he knows me know, stupid.

TALBOT: He knows a sucker when he sees one. Look, it's not just this meeting. It's the follow-up meetings, and taking him here and there, and by the time you've done that, you'll have another two or three on top. It's never ending.

[She sees the rota.]

TALBOT: And you've put your name down on that rota again. Sometimes, David Briggs, I could –

SQUIRREL: Don't call me that.

TALBOT: Sometimes – Miss - David – Briggs – I swear I'll make the best Quiche Lorraine –

SQUIRREL: *[Enjoying this]* Without the Lorraine -

TALBOT: - without the Lorraine – I'll make the best Quiche which is not a Lorraine the world has ever seen, and shove it up your arse!

SQUIRREL: Mmm. Interesting...

[She wrestles with him. They are both giggling.]

TALBOT: Will you take your name off that rota?

SQUIRREL: No!

TALBOT: I'll break your arm.

SQUIRREL: I don't care if you bit my balls off.

TALBOT: Take your name off that rota

SQUIRREL: Shan't. Can't make me.

TALBOT: If you don't take your name off that rota, I'll never speak to you again.

SQUIRREL: Don't tempt me.

TALBOT: Pig!

SQUIRREL: Cow!

TALBOT: I warn you, I'll make a list of all the dates you're on, and I'll jam the lines all evening.

SQUIRREL: I'll hang up on you.

TALBOT: You never hang up on a caller.

SQUIRREL: You're not a caller, you're a nutcase.

TALBOT: I could kill you! *[She gives up.]* Where are you meeting him? Maybe you can come to me after - ?

SQUIRREL: He's coming round to me.

TALBOT: Jesus, Squirrel. What are you thinking of?

SQUIRREL: I honestly didn't think he'd go anywhere else. I tried all the usual choices. It was that or lose him.

TALBOT: You should have talked to him some more.

SQUIRREL: I ran out of talk. I'm so tired tonight.

TALBOT: *[Ironic]* I wonder why.

SQUIRREL: I'll get Julian to meet him with me. He's not doing anything Wednesday, he won't mind.

TALBOT: If you can prise him away from some horny student or other.

SQUIRREL: Sometimes you have to break rules.

TALBOT: You do need a break. Badly.

SQUIRREL: I'll survive. Someone's got to fill the holes.

TALBOT: Why don't you leave that to the dykes? We're good at filling holes.

SQUIRREL: I can't believe you said that.

TALBOT: It's all the time I spend with gay men.

SQUIRREL: I'll tell on you!

[They have relaxed.]

SQUIRREL: What's the time?

TALBOT: Half nine. Only half an hour to go.

SQUIRREL: With any luck the rush is over.

TALBOT: I've told you not to say things like that.

[They both look at the phone.]

SQUIRREL: See? Superstitious old codswallop.

[They relax]

TALBOT: So you're not going to take your name off the rota?

SQUIRREL: No. But I won't put down for any more.

TALBOT: Promise?

SQUIRREL: Promise.

[The phone rings]

SQUIRREL: Fuck.

TALBOT: Told you so, *[Picks up the phone.]* Hello, Switchboard, can I help you. *[Pause]* From London? Well, I think you'll find it a bit dull round there by contrast. *[Pause]* I'll see what there is. Can you hang on a second? Thank you.

[She thumbs through files.]

TALBOT: You've got a choice of two groups really. Depends on your political outlook. How do you feel about Lesbian Feminists? Oh, good. Me too. In that case, there's a nice little nest of radical dykes about ten miles from you – do you have a car? Oh, pity. Well, what say I give them your number, and maybe they can get in touch with you and arrange something? There's a couple of cars in the group, I think. Will you give me your number? Your number? *[Pause]* What? Oh, sure I am. Hundred percent certified lesbian. This number's only staffed by gays.

[There is a long silence, in which TALBOT is first worried then stunned. She drops the phone back on the receiver. SQUIRREL leans towards her.]

SQUIRREL: What happened?

TALBOT: Hold my hand. *[He does so.]*

SQUIRREL: What is it, sugar?

TALBOT: "The tide is rising that will sweep you and all your filthy pervert friends back where you belong. The smoke will choke you, the fire will burn you..."

SQUIRREL: It's them again. That's the way they do it.

TALBOT: One minute we were just chatting, and she seemed really nice, we were on the same wavelength, you know? And then - She didn't shout or anything. It was all so quiet. She just went - hard. Quiet and hard. She meant it, Squirrel. Like she was certain it was going to happen.

SQUIRREL: I know, I know.

TALBOT: It was like a spider suddenly crawling out of the earpiece.

SQUIRREL: Don't -

TALBOT: Why didn't you warn me?

SQUIRREL: I did mention it. But it's difficult to explain it, how it happens. Nobody understands how it works until they've had one.

TALBOT: How long has it been going on?

SQUIRREL: Three weeks, on and off.

TALBOT: How many have you had?

SQUIRREL: About six.

TALBOT: Oh you poor Squirrel.

[She hugs him, ruffling his hair.]

SQUIRREL: *[After a long pause.]* Remind me to ring Julian about
Wednesday. And to get some more stickers.

[Suddenly determined]

SQUIRREL: I'm gonna plaster stickers all over this bloody city tonight.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACKOUT

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene One

[SQUIRREL's flat. Wednesday night. Litter everywhere. Décor suggests someone whose tastes and attitudes were formed in the late 1960s. Fire on. Pink Floyd's 'Dark Side of the Moon' plays softly in the background. SQUIRREL has fallen asleep in a chair. Bell rings. He wakes up, looks at the clock.]

SQUIRREL: Fuck!

[He hurriedly heaps papers etc behind the chair, switches off the record player. Looks at the time again.]

SQUIRREL: Where the hell is Julian?

[Bell rings again.]

SQUIRREL: OK, I'm coming.

[He goes into the hall. Voices in the hall. Enter ROGER, followed by SQUIRREL. ROGER is in his early thirties, but appears older. He is a flabby, pasty man, with a pudding bowl haircut which his Mum has given him. Badly. There is an aura of despair about him. Negative vibes, awkward, no sense of humour at all. Not attractive in any sense. Cheap clothes from the Littlewood's catalogue, dull and frumpish.]

SQUIRREL: Glad you made it.

ROGER: I turned right at the cinema instead of left. I didn't realise it was a cinema. Not till I was right on top of it. It had funny writing outside.

SQUIRREL: It's an Indian cinema.

ROGER: You got a lot of wogs round here?

SQUIRREL: Please don't use that word. There's quite a lot of Indians. And Bangladeshis. And Sikhs. It's a very mixed area.

ROGER: I wouldn't like that. All that dirt.

SQUIRREL: It's no different from –

ROGER: They smell, they do.

SQUIRREL: Cooking smells. They use different spices, that's all.

ROGER: Taking over everywhere. They're taking over our estate too. Our Mum won't go near the corner shop, not since it was taken over by Pakis. And when you read them stories in the papers –

SQUIRREL: What stories? [*Changes his mind, doesn't want to go down that road.*] Look, do you mind if we change the subject. We're going to disagree when it comes to politics, I can see that.

ROGER: I'm not interested in politics. They's all the same, them politicians.

SQUIRREL: I need to make one thing clear to you. This is my flat, and there are some things I won't put up with, including racist language like that. So please watch what you're saying, or I shall have to ask you to leave.

ROGER: I knew you wouldn't like me. [*He turns to leave.*]

SQUIRREL: You don't have to go as long as you promise not to make me upset. I don't want to start by getting angry.

ROGER: Pardon my French, I'm sure. Sorry I spoke.

SQUIRREL: As long as you understand.

ROGER: It was just that cinema. Confused me.

SQUIRREL: Easily done.

ROGER: I forgot which way you said. Sorry.

SQUIRREL: Forget it.

ROGER: I should have written it down. I thought I should have written it down, but I was scared my Mum might find the bit of paper and – you know.

SQUIRREL: Well you got here. That's the main thing.

ROGER: Yes.

SQUIRREL: Sit down.

ROGER: Thank you very much.

[He perches primly and uncomfortably on the edge of the armchair.]

SQUIRREL: Tea?

ROGER: That would be very nice.

SQUIRREL: I'm afraid I don't run to coffee. I've given it up since it got so expensive.

ROGER: Oh.

SQUIRREL: I've got Camomile or Peppermint.

[Roger is confused]

ROGER: I don't know... Is they tea, then?

SQUIRREL: Yes.

ROGER: Don't you drink real tea, then?

SQUIRREL: They are real tea.

ROGER: Don't you have PG Tips? I like PG Tips. I like the monkeys in the adverts.

SQUIRREL: That's cruel to the chimps, dressing them in suits.

ROGER: They's only animals.

[Pause. SQUIRREL considers replying but decides it's not worth it.]

ROGER: Don't you like real tea?

SQUIRREL: Oh. I might have some tea-bags somewhere. Just make yourself at home. I'll be right back.

ROGER: Things are a price now, aren't they?

SQUIRREL: What?

ROGER: My Mum says she wonders how she manages to make ends meet.

SQUIRREL: Oh, yes, terrible. I'll put the kettle on.

[SQUIRREL exits. ROGER looks round. It is the kind of room he's never seen before, and it intimidates him. He looks uncertainly at a psychedelic poster of The Grateful Dead, craning his head to make it out, but not daring to get out of his chair. Re-enter SQUIRREL. ROGER sits back up bolt upright, as if he's been caught doing something he shouldn't.]

SQUIRREL: It's a leftover from Uni –

ROGER: Uni -?

SQUIRREL: College. University. I still keep a few things round me.

ROGER: It's very – unusual. *[He doesn't find college easy.]* I couldn't have anything like that in my room.

SQUIRREL: Why not?

ROGER: My Mum wouldn't allow anything like that in the house.

SQUIRREL: I don't suppose you'd want it anyway. It's a bit dated.

ROGER: Is it?

SQUIRREL: Yes. 1970...

ROGER: I wish I had a room of my own like this. Where you can put your own things up. Do what you want. You know.

SQUIRREL: You could if you wanted.

ROGER: Oh no. It would kill her. She's got A Heart, see. And I'm her Only.

SQUIRREL: One day maybe. *[Pause]* Sorry it's so untidy. I was going to clean it up before you came, but I just sat down for a few minutes and nodded off. It's a good job you came when you did or I'd have been passed out all evening.

ROGER: Sorry I was late. I got lost, see –

SQUIRREL: *[Hastily]* You said. *[Pause]*

ROGER: It's a nice room. It's nice to be untidy in your own room.

SQUIRREL: I'm not home very much. What about you?

ROGER: What about me?

SQUIRREL: I want to know about you. What do you do?

ROGER: I stay in my room pretty much. I keep myself to myself. They watch telly, mostly

SQUIRREL: They - ?

ROGER: My Mum and Dad. Sit there in front of the telly. Sleeping like you. They's quite old. I don't like the telly. Load of rubbish if you ask me.

SQUIRREL: What do you do?

ROGER: Nothing much. Sit and think. Read a bit.

SQUIRREL: You said you liked music.

ROGER: I listen to a bit of music. Sometimes.

SQUIRREL: What sort of music do you like?

ROGER: I like Easy Listening. It's relaxing. Mantovani, you know, Ronnie Aldrich, stuff like that. I like Easy Listening.

SQUIRREL: Oh. *[Pause]*

ROGER: It's the stereo, see. You can hear the stereo, You got to have good Stereo Effect.

SQUIRREL: *[Clutching at straws]* Oh yes. You said you were building your own...

ROGER: That's right. Fancy you remembering that!

SQUIRREL: How's it coming along?

ROGER: Oh. OK. *[Pause]*

SQUIRREL: How far've you got?

ROGER: I got the speakers done.

SQUIRREL: Good, good.

ROGER: It's the amp that's bugged. Pardon my French.

SQUIRREL: Not at all.

ROGER: Can't get the right parts.

SQUIRREL: I see –

ROGER: You're bugged without the right parts.

SQUIRREL: You would be. *[Pause]* What can't you get?

ROGER: It's the output transistors, see. Can't get compatible output transistors. Overload the circuits, that's what they do. Speakers are 30 watt, so you need 50 watt amplifier at least, if you're going to expand. You want a set you can build on, if you know what I mean. Something that's going to grow. And I don't want to blow the amp, do I?

SQUIRREL: No, of course not,

ROGER: I might go to Tandy's on Saturday, see if they's got any.

SQUIRREL: Good idea.

ROGER: They're probably out of them too.

SQUIRREL: It's worth a try.

ROGER: If it isn't raining.

SQUIRREL: They might have them/

ROGER: My Mum usually makes me do her shopping.

SQUIRREL: In town?

ROGER: I don't like shopping in town.

SQUIRREL: Oh.

ROGER: Too crowded.

SQUIRREL: But they might have the parts.

ROGER: They'll be out of stock like everywhere else.

SQUIRREL: *[Eager to get out of this]* Kettle! Should have boiled. Do you take sugar?

ROGER: Three, please.

[SQUIRREL winces]

SQUIRREL: OK. Won't be a moment. Have a look round if you want. There's one or two books might interest you. Over there.

[He exits. ROGER wanders round. He runs his finger along the top of the table, finds dust. Frowns. Examines books with curiosity. Picks up a copy of 'Men Loving Men', and looks at the pictures. He is shocked but drawn. Re-enter SQUIRREL.]

SQUIRREL: Teas. That's yours.

[ROGER is still absorbed in the book with horrified fascination.]

SQUIRREL: What are you looking at? Ah, "Men Loving Men". It's very good, that one. I always recommend it for people who are coming out.

ROGER: *[Looking up suddenly]* I wish I had a friend like that.

SQUIRREL: Maybe you will, one day. These things happen.

ROGER: Have you got a friend?

SQUIRREL: I've got lots of friends. But not in the way you mean, no.

ROGER: I'd like a friend.

SQUIRREL: You can't expect one to drop into your lap, just like that. You have to work at it.

ROGER: Have you ever had a friend like that?

[He shows SQUIRREL the page of the book.]

SQUIRREL: One or two, yes.

ROGER: What's it like?

SQUIRREL: *[Rather fazed by the abruptness of this]* It's a bit difficult to describe, really. It's very nice to have someone to share things with, but there are times when you want to be on your own.

ROGER: If I had a friend, I'd never want to be on my own.

SQUIRREL: What I mean is, you feel close, but you feel shut in too. Monogamous relationships have their bad points as well.

ROGER: Mono – what you said?

SQUIRREL: Having a partner, just one –

ROGER: I meant – what's it like, doing it?

SQUIRREL: You've never - ?

ROGER: No, I've never done it. I've wanted to - I've wanted to so long –

[He makes as if to approach SQUIRREL. SQUIRREL backs away, and looks at his watch. Where is JULIAN? He is worried.]

SQUIRREL: Where did you get our number from?

ROGER: It was on the radio. Sunday morning. They got this vicar does this phone-in. My Mum likes it cos she can't get to church. He had this queer bloke ring him up, Vicar gave him the number. I got it before Mum switched off. Vicar said it was all right.

SQUIRREL: Look, can we take this from the start. You think you're gay, right?

ROGER: I've always felt – well, different.

SQUIRREL: Different?

ROGER: You know, about girls and that. All my mates going on about these birds they were getting. I never wanted any of that. And then – *[He pauses]*

SQUIRREL: Then - ?

ROGER: I never talked to anyone like this –

SQUIRREL: Go on –

ROGER: You won't tell anyone?

SQUIRREL: Why should I?

ROGER: You might. Tell your friends. For a laugh.

SQUIRREL: Never,

ROGER: Promise?

SQUIRREL: Promise.

ROGER: When I left school, I went on this apprenticeship. Left at fifteen, see. You did then.

SQUIRREL: I know. It changed when I was at school. Go on. What did you do?

ROGER: I went to be a lathe operator. Six months. And there's this foreman at the factory, lived down our street, well, not down the street, about half a mile down the road, round the corner. You know where the old pickle-factory - ?

SQUIRREL: *[Anxious to keep ROGER on track]* The foreman, yes....
What happened?

ROGER: One day he offered me a lift home. It was the last week of training...

SQUIRREL: Yes?

ROGER: He said he had to nip to the breaker's yard to find a second-hand carburettor. It was on the other side of the city. Well, I wasn't in any hurry.

SQUIRREL: And - ?

ROGER: He stopped on this waste ground. There weren't no houses round or anything. He tried to touch me.

SQUIRREL: And did you –

ROGER: *[Shocked]* No! He was the foreman!

[Long pause.]

ROGER: He asked me to take off my jersey. I didn't want to, cos my Mum had knitted it, and I was a bit scared. But I did after a bit, and he –

[Pause]

SQUIRREL: What did he do? You can tell me, I'm trying to help.
[Harder] I can't help you if you won't tell me things.

ROGER: He felt my nipples.

SQUIRREL: And... ?

ROGER: He played with my nipples. I didn't know what he was doing really, but it was sort of nice, and exciting, but then I thought what if someone came and I told him to stop it. And then he started messing around a bit more, and I get

scared, and I get out of the car and run away. My Mum was ever so angry when I was late for tea.

SQUIRREL: And that was it?

ROGER: I never saw him again. I was off sick the rest of the week, then I got transferred when I got a proper job. *[Pause]* I didn't like him, not really.

SQUIRREL: When was this?

ROGER: Must be about thirteen years ago. It was the day after Winston Churchill died because we had his picture over the fireplace and my Mum had put a bit of black ribbon round it.

SQUIRREL: And since then - ? Nothing - ?

ROGER: Course, there's been blokes I thought about. At work and that. There's this young lad just started. Quiet kid. I try to help him out a bit when he's stuck. I thought about him a lot.

SQUIRREL: But you never said anything...?

ROGER: I couldn't. I'd get the sack.

SQUIRREL: Maybe he's –

ROGER: I never been in toilets or anything like that. That's where you go, isn't it?

SQUIRREL: Some people.

ROGER: I went down this toilet, years ago. I went into the City Centre for the Christmas shopping. This man stood next to me, started waving it about. I didn't want none of that. I don't go to toilets now.

SQUIRREL: Ever?

ROGER: I make sure I've been before I go out.

SQUIRREL: What about - ?

ROGER: I got to thinking about this kid at work, and then my Dad started on about how I never had any friends, and when was I going to bring home a nice girl.

SQUIRREL: Does he do that much?

ROGER: He's getting on. He's 86 next year. He goes on about grandchildren. Gets on my wick.

SQUIRREL: And then there was the Vicar...

ROGER: Vicar?

SQUIRREL: On the radio.

ROGER: Yes, and then they went up the British Legion, so I thought about it a bit. Then I rung up. I don't like the Legion. Don't like drinking.

SQUIRREL: You said.

ROGER: Don't like the taste. It's got a funny taste.

[He takes a first sip of tea. Makes a face.]

SQUIRREL: What's wrong?

ROGER: This has got a funny taste too.

SQUIRREL: I put in three sugars.

ROGER: It's got a funny taste.

SQUIRREL: *[Twigs]* Oh, you mean the brown sugar.

ROGER: I don't like it.

SQUIRREL: All I've got. Sorry.

[ROGER puts the tea aside.]

ROGER: That's okay. *[It isn't.]*

SQUIRREL: So now you want to meet gay people?

ROGER: I'd like a Friend.

SQUIRREL: You can make lots of friends.

ROGER: I mean a real Friend.

SQUIRREL: You can't find one of them without meeting people.

ROGER: I thought – you might be my Friend.

SQUIRREL: That's not possible. Sorry.

ROGER: Don't you like me?

SQUIRREL: Not like that, no. Sorry. I'll do everything I can to help you, but –

ROGER: You haven't got a Friend, you told me so. Were you fibbing?

SQUIRREL: No. It's just that –

ROGER: You don't like me. I know you don't.

SQUIRREL: Listen. Even if I wanted to, we have a rule on Switchboard. The one rule nobody breaks, ever. No sex with callers. Sorry to put it crudely. It's a hard rule sometimes, but if we didn't have it there'd be all sorts of complications. If it got out that there had been anything

like that going on, we could get done for conspiracy, soliciting, procuring and god knows what.

ROGER: Oh.

SQUIRREL: Do you understand that?

ROGER: *[Very low]* Yes. *[He has become almost sulky.]* Play with my nipples, please.

SQUIRREL: I'm sorry...?

ROGER: It's not sex, that isn't. It isn't Doing It.

SQUIRREL: It's not the sort of thing I'd feel happy about, I told you why.

[He looks at his watch, worried.]

ROGER: If you liked me, you'd play with my nipples.

SQUIRREL: I do like you. As a person.

ROGER: Not as a Friend,

SQUIRREL: You can't just jump in like that. You can't expect everything to happen all at once.

ROGER: So you could be my Friend? One day?

SQUIRREL: Not really, no. If I'm honest.

ROGER: All I wanted was a Friend.

SQUIRREL: There are plenty of others.

ROGER: You keep saying that. Where?

SQUIRREL: We could go along to the Gay Centre. Would you like that?

[ROGER shakes his head stubbornly.]

SQUIRREL: OK, what if I introduced you to some friends of mine, somewhere else.

ROGER: I don't drink.

SQUIRREL: That's a bit of a drawback. Most gay life is pub life. That's why the Centre is there.

ROGER: I don't want to be seen going into no gay centre.

SQUIRREL: Who's going to see you? The streets are deserted round there. Anyone you saw would be going to the Centre too.

ROGER: There might be someone from work.

SQUIRREL: In which case, you'll know they're gay too. Or at least sympathetic. You'll have something in common. Hey, maybe you'll see that kid from work –

ROGER: *[Sharp]* No.

[The phone rings. SQUIRREL answers it.]

SQUIRREL: Julian? Where are you? *[Pause]* Shit a brick! *[Pause]* Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Is there any reason she should have found out? Oh, God. *[To ROGER]* I'm sorry about this. I'll keep it short. *[To phone]* And there wasn't a chance to talk to her about it? *[Pause]* Well, for Christ sake, why did you leave them lying around? Surely to God you could have found somewhere to hide a bra and panties? They're not exactly large – not even yours. Joke. *[Pause]* Look, I'm with that guy – the one you were meant to be meeting with me. *[Pause]* No, that's not a dig, but he's here right now, so I can't help you. *[Pause]* Not till Friday. Have you tried ringing Trevor? Clare? *[Pause]* Don't be like that she's really nice when you get to know her. Look, I must go back to Roger. *[Pause]* That's his name. I'll see you Friday, okay? Bye.

[Puts the phone down. To ROGER:]

- SQUIRREL: Sorry about that. I'm afraid you won't have the chance to meet Julian. He's involved in the TV group and –
- ROGER: Never watch it. Load of rubbish.
- SQUIRREL: No. TV. Transvestite. Men who like dressing up as women.
- ROGER: I don't hold with anything kinky like that.
- SQUIRREL: They're nice people.
- ROGER: I read about them in the papers. It's not right.
- SQUIRREL: Then let's forget about it, shall we?
- ROGER: Here! He wasn't going to come here dressed like that, was he?
- SQUIRREL: Of course not.
- ROGER: Are you one of those – transvestites?
- SQUIRREL: No.
- ROGER: I don't want to meet anyone like that. It's not like being bent. That's just a curse that you're born with.
- SQUIRREL: Please. It's not a curse.
- ROGER: Isn't it? All alone for fifteen years – do you think that's not a curse. All I wanted was a friend. A strong friend. *[He is almost in tears.]* It is a curse, being different. I hate it. Lying awake at night, sweating, heart pounding. I thought you'd understand.

SQUIRREL: I do. But you've got to come to meet us half way. You've got to give a little.

ROGER: What d'you mean?

SQUIRREL: Meet people.

ROGER: I can't.

SQUIRREL: You met me, didn't you?

ROGER: That's different. I thought you was nice.

SQUIRREL: It's not about me. It's about you. You've got to forget this stuff about 'curses', see?

ROGER: It feels like a curse, whatever you say. When you're out, you think people are watching you. I'm sure they can tell. That's why I keep myself to myself.

SQUIRREL: *[Suddenly angry]* Is that what you want to do the rest of your life? Sit in your room making your stereo and fantasising? Because if that's what you want you're going the right way about it. If you're happy with that, fine, but you weren't happy when you rang me up, were you? *[No answer]* Were you?

ROGER: *[Reluctantly]* No...

SQUIRREL: And you wanted to do something about it, didn't you?

ROGER: I don't know.

SQUIRREL: Your parents are old, aren't they? They won't last for ever.

ROGER: That's a cruel thing to say. That's horrible, that is.

SQUIRREL: You might as well face facts. And after they've gone, then what will you do? You got any other family?

ROGER: No.

SQUIRREL: You'll be on your own then. You'll have to look after yourself. No Mum to knit you jumpers any more. Or cook, or do your washing. You'll have to start again, find a new place probably. You'll be all alone.

[ROGER is overcome with self-pity at the prospect.]

ROGER: *[Starts crying again]* That's horrible that is. How can you say such things. You're cruel, you are.

SQUIRREL: *[Regretting it, instinctively putting his arms round ROGER]* I'm sorry. I'm sorry I made you cry, I didn't mean to. What I'm trying to say is, it doesn't have to be like that. I'm trying to show you a way out.

ROGER: No you're not. You're just spiteful. I don't like you any more.

SQUIRREL: Roger...

ROGER: And you don't like me.

SQUIRREL: Roger, look at me. You've got to trust me. If you'll let yourself be guided, you'll be going into a different way of life, like nothing you've ever known before. You'll need a navigator. A lot of it's going to be very strange, and difficult, and take a long, long time, and maybe you'll even get a bit hurt here and there. But it's the only way of smashing this shell you've made for yourself.

ROGER: What if I don't want to? What if I'm happy as I am?

SQUIRREL: But you're not, you know you're not. You told me you're not.

[Phone rings again.]

Hello? Julian? Why are you calling again? I told you - What happened? Well, you've hidden the things now, I take it? Good. Then all you can do is sit tight and see if she brings up the subject. Look, can I meet you at the Gay Centre tomorrow night. In the bar, half nine. I've got a meeting upstairs till then, but I'll come straight down. OK, Bye.

[Puts the phone down. To ROGER:]

He tried ringing another TV, but his wife answered and it freaked him out.

ROGER: Oh... *[Pause]* I think I'd better go.

SQUIRREL: Have you ever thought of leaving home?

ROGER: Oh, no. I couldn't.

SQUIRREL: Why not?

ROGER: I couldn't. Where'd I go?

SQUIRREL: There's flats. Bedsits. Lots of people do it.

ROGER: What's I do? I can't look after myself.

SQUIRREL: Time you learnt, then.

ROGER: It's too late for that.

SQUIRREL: You don't even like being there.

ROGER: It's not that bad.

SQUIRREL: That's not what you said before.

ROGER: It would kill them.

SQUIRREL: Nonsense. They're tough old birds if they have to be. They got through the blitz, they'll get over you leaving home.

ROGER: They're used to having me round the place, see?

SQUIRREL: At least you can meet some more people.

ROGER: I'm not going to that Gay Centre. I'm not meeting transvestitites.

SQUIRREL: I didn't mean that.

ROGER: I can't get away in the evenings.

SQUIRREL: You're here tonight.

ROGER: I told them I was going to my Aunt Tillie's. They'll be back from the Legion by ten so I can't stop long.

SQUIRREL: They must go out other nights.

ROGER: They never tell me.

SQUIRREL: But you have to tell them.

ROGER: That's different. I'm the only son.

SQUIRREL: If you find they're going out, give me another ring and I can meet you again. With a friend next time.

ROGER: You'll be busy. You're always busy. You wouldn't want to be bothered with me.

SQUIRREL: I would.

ROGER: You didn't want to be bothered with him. *[Indicates the phone.]*

SQUIRREL: If I was busy, or out, you could ring switchboard again. There's always someone on in the evening.

ROGER: I don't know them.

SQUIRREL: You didn't know me.

ROGER: That's different.

SQUIRREL: Why's it different? If you did it once, you can do it again.

ROGER: No.

SQUIRREL: Why's it different?

ROGER: It just is. *[Pause]* I think I'd better go.

SQUIRREL: Please don't.

ROGER: I'd better. My Mum will be worrying.

SQUIRREL: She's not even there.

ROGER: But she might be. Maybe she's phoned Auntie Tilly.

SQUIRREL: If you're that worried... When can we get together again?

ROGER: I dunno. Dunno when they'll go out.

SQUIRREL: When they do go out, will you give me a ring? Here's my home number...

[He writes down the number on a scrap of paper.]

ROGER: I can't keep nothing like that. She'd start asking.

SQUIRREL: Then memorise it.

ROGER: No head for figures, me.

SQUIRREL: You remembered Switchboard, didn't you?

ROGER: Well –

SQUIRREL: What's their number?

ROGER: 627-2000.

SQUIRREL: See? You can remember if you want to.

ROGER: That's an easy one.

SQUIRREL: Give them a ring when you can.

ROGER: I dunno.

SQUIRREL: Please...

ROGER: I'm sorry I wasted your time like this.

SQUIRREL: You haven't.

ROGER: I shouldn't have come. I knew I shouldn't have come.

SQUIRREL: Don't say that.

ROGER: I just thought –

[He starts crying again. SQUIRREL is torn between the desire to comfort him and the dangers of physical touch.]

ROGER: Fifteen years. Fifteen years I been waiting. You don't know what it's like.

SQUIRREL: I do, really.

ROGER: How can you? You never done what I've done.

SQUIRREL: No, but –

ROGER: All I wanted was a friend.

[SQUIRREL can't stand this any more and comforts him.]

SQUIRREL: *[Gently]* You've got a friend. Please believe that.

[ROGER turns suddenly and looks intently at him.]

ROGER: Play with my nipples.

SQUIRREL: What?

ROGER: If you're my friend, prove it. Touch my nipples. Please.

[SQUIRREL hesitates, wondering what to say. A long pause. The phone rings. SQUIRREL moves towards it.]

ROGER: I'll be going then.

SQUIRREL: No, wait.

ROGER: It's best. I'm in the way.

SQUIRREL: You're not.

ROGER: You did your best. Bye.

SQUIRREL: I won't answer it. That'll show you.

ROGER: It'll ring again.

SQUIRREL: No –

ROGER: Course it will. I'm not stupid.

SQUIRREL: If it rings again, I still won't answer it.

ROGER: *[Heavy]* What's the point?

SQUIRREL: I'm on Switchboard Saturday. Give me a ring then.

ROGER: Maybe. Maybe I'm best off as I am.

SQUIRREL: Please.

ROGER: I'll think about it.

[He makes to go. As he gets to the door:]

SQUIRREL: If I touch your nipples, will you come to the Gay Centre with me?

ROGER: *[Unable to believe his luck]* What?

SQUIRREL: If I play with your nipples, will you come to the Centre with me? Come to the social on Friday. You don't have to drink or anything.

ROGER: But what about my Mum?

SQUIRREL: Go and see your Auntie Tillie again. Tell them you're going to a movie.

ROGER: I don't like the pictures. All that soppy romance, load of rubbish.

SQUIRREL: Maybe there's a concert you could go to. I don't know – James Last or someone like that. You can think of something. Will you? Meet me?

ROGER: I dunno.

SQUIRREL: I'll play with your nipples. Nothing else, mind, but – I'll do that. So – come to the Centre Friday?

ROGER: *[Agonised pause]* Yes.

SQUIRREL: Come here.

[ROGER moves to him.]

SQUIRREL: Take off your shirt.

ROGER: No. You first.

[SQUIRREL strips his shirt clinically, quickly, then hesitates]

ROGER: Please..

[ROGER closes his eyes. SQUIRREL slowly reaches out his hands, unbuttons ROGER's shirt, then starts rubbing his nipples. ROGER lets out a long sigh, as the lights slowly fade.]

ROGER: Harder... harder....

BLACKOUT

[In the Blackout, the phone rings.]

Scene Two

[The meeting room of Act I, sc i. Six months later. TALBOT is reading the evening paper. She throws it away in disgust.]

TALBOT: The bastards! Oh my poor Squirrel.

[Enter CAROL]

CAROL: Hello. Am I the first?

TALBOT: Norton's next door. He's trying to phone more volunteers.

CAROL: Have you read it?

TALBOT: Yes

CAROL: What do you think?

TALBOT: It's filth.

CAROL: But if it's true –

TALBOT: It's still filth. *The Echo* has been waiting for a chance to get us for years. This is just an excuse. Look at the campaign they've had against the Gay Centre.

CAROL: The council couldn't just close us down, could they?

TALBOT: That's what *The Echo* wants. Fortunately we have a few allies. Councillor Martin. Councillor Crossman.

CAROL: They'll find it hard to defend this.

TALBOT: After all the hassle we had getting adverts into the papers in the first place. Remember CHE took the issue to the Press Council, then the NUJ worked to rule... Then thank heaven Mr Born-Again Family-Newspaper retired.

- CAROL: Say it quietly, but I've actually seen the new Advertising Manager at the Centre disco. Her name's Jocelyn. She's quite tasty, in a lipsticky sort of way.
- TALBOT: I think I saw NEV copping off with her. That can't have done us any harm.
- CAROL: But now the Editor can turn round and say 'I told you so.'
- TALBOT: And how they'll love rubbing it in. Bastards.
- CAROL: And yet... there must be something in it. They wouldn't dare print a complete lie.
- TALBOT: Wouldn't they?
- CAROL: They'd worry about libel, wouldn't they. Squirrel could sue. I can't believe he'd –
- TALBOT: Of course he didn't. He knows better than that.
- CAROL: What can we do?
- TALBOT: Fight back. Picket. Throw a brick through the window. You name it...
- [Enter NEV]*
- NEV: Sorry I can't stop. Got to get me gear out.
- TALBOT: What do you mean?
- NEV: You've seen it, haven't you?
- TALBOT: So what?
- NEV: That's it, isn't it?
- TALBOT: No it's not. For a start, we don't even know if it's true.

NEV: Doesn't matter if it's true. Those blokes aren't letting the grass grow under their feet, I can tell you. It was on the local radio too. I heard it on me way into town. They're not going to let it stop there. They're gonna keep at it till something gets done.

TALBOT: Something is going to get done. We'll demonstrate. Put out a press release.

NEV: Big fucking deal. A press release – that'll put the fear of God into them! Whatever happens, I reckon this place will be swarming with pigs any day soon. Then the Post Office will 'withdraw service' as they call it. It means your phone gets cut off. And then sooner or later some bright spark is going to go sniffing round that little back room, and he's going to say, "I wonder where all this lovely gear come from." And he's going to lift up that little black box, and see Post Office Telecommunications on the bottom, and he's going to twig that this wasn't put in by Post Office engineers, not officially. And then the shit will really hit the fan.

TALBOT: And what about Switchboard?

NEV: What about my fucking job? It's a criminal offence, what I've been doing for this Switchboard. It's almost on a par with treason. Do you want me to go to prison?

TALBOT: I'm sorry.

NEV: I'm sorry too. It's too bloody risky. *[She goes towards the door.]* I'll start disconnecting. Let me know when you want me in the meeting.

[She exits]

CAROL: Do you think she's right about the police?

TALBOT: Maybe, if the worst comes to the word. It may not come to anything at all. We just don't know.

CAROL: *[Exasperated]* How could he - ?

TALBOT: He didn't. It's all panicking about nothing.

CAROL: But what about - ?

TALBOT: Wait and see. Let Squirrel tell us for himself.

[Enter NORTON]

NORTON: Only the two of you?

TALBOT: The lesbians are always the first to arrive.

CAROL: NEV's upstairs. She's disconnecting her gear.

NORTON: Good.

TALBOT: Good? It's a disaster!

NORTON: She's right to be careful.

TALBOT: Careful of what? Libellous crap that no-one can prove?

NORTON: We have to protect the reputation of Switchboard.

TALBOT: Even if it means closing it down? How do you propose we carry on without any equipment?

NORTON: I don't want to argue with you. Can we get started? Get NEV in.

TALBOT: What about Squirrel?

NORTON: We can't wait.

CAROL: Four of us? Out of thirty? That can't be right.

TALBOT: The quorum is six.

NORTON: We can't wait.

CAROL: NEV says the police could be here at any time.

NORTON: She might well be right.

TALBOT: "Might" – "Might!" If they haven't got a warrant, don't let them in.

NORTON: And if we don't let them in, how does it look then?

TALBOT: What about all the confidential files? The log books, the letters...

NORTON: As far as they're concerned, or anybody else, we got nothing to hide.

TALBOT: And what about Squirrel?

[Enter JULIAN. NORTON taps his watch accusingly.]

JULIAN: I got caught in the rush-hour. What's the big drama then? It all sounded very mysterious on the phone.

NORTON: I was phoning from here. The phone may be tapped.

JULIAN: Get away! Were we being tapped? Why didn't somebody say?

NORTON: We had no reason to think we were before, but now something's come up to make it all too likely.

TALBOT: Have you seen tonight's *Echo*?

JULIAN: Never buy it. Right-wing rag.

TALBOT: You'd better read it.

[She hands the paper to him.]

JULIAN: What an awful picture! Where on earth did they get that?
Squirrel looks like a junkie.

NORTON: He was at the time, I believe.

[Enter SQUIRREL]

SQUIRREL: Hi, Sugar. Sorry I'm late, Norton. I came as soon as I got
your message. Thanks for dropping it round.

NORTON: Jocelyn at *The Echo* tipped me off. I wanted to get to you
before the story broke. Thanks for coming at such short
notice.

SQUIRREL: I hope it's not going to take long. I've got a guy to meet
at 8 o'clock, and I'd rather like to grab some chips
beforehand in case he wants to go for a drink. I haven't
had anything all day.

NORTON: Don't worry, I'll meet him.

SQUIRREL: But I've –

NORTON: I'll meet him.

JULIAN: Probably won't turn up anyway.

SQUIRREL: Why the long faces, everybody?

NORTON: You mean you have no idea?

SQUIRREL: Is this a game?

TALBOT: Haven't you seen the paper?

SQUIRREL: No. Should I?

NORTON: Read it to him, Julian.

JULIAN: *[Handing the paper over]* Here

NORTON: No. You read it. You can get the full effect/

JULIAN: *[Deeply uncomfortable]* "Sex by phone. An *Evening Echo* exclusive...

A telephone 'counselling service' – inverted commas – claiming to offer 'confidential information and advice about homosexuality' – also inverted commas – was today revealed as nothing more than a 'male brothel' – more inverted commas.

They love their inverted commas, don't they?

NORTON: Protection against libel if they're quoting. Go on.

JULIAN: "Men could ring up and arrange a meeting for sex any evening," alleged Mr Roger Wallace, of Cambourne Drive, Handsworth. In an exclusive interview, Mr Wallace told an *Echo* reporter, "I rang them up once. I was hoping they would give me treatment to help me. I realise now I should have seen a doctor, but I was under a lot of emotional stress at the time."

Instead of receiving treatment, Mr Wallace alleges that the operator, "Squirrel" – more inverted commas – arranged to meet him at a private address a few days later, where he offered to have sex with him.

SQUIRREL: That's not true.

TALBOT: It gets worse.

JULIAN: "I didn't know what to do," said Mr Wallace. "I was very confused. "I let him do what he wanted, but I didn't enjoy it.

SQUIRREL: Like fuck he didn't.

[A thunderbolt. The others look at him, appalled.]

JULIAN: Do you – er – do you want me to go on?

NORTON: Yes. Yes.

JULIAN: This is Wallace again. "He later persuaded me to visit haunts of homosexuals and tried to persuade me to lead the sort of life he was leading. I soon realised this wasn't for me." Mr Wallace claims that he saw several showbusiness figures and at least one MP at these places.

Mr Wallace now claims to be completely cured. "It was just a bad patch I was going through," he said. He praised *Torch*, the Christian homosexual counselling service. "I went to see them after my mother died. I was so upset, what with that and everything. They helped to put me right. They made me see that I could cure myself if I really wanted to."

Recently Mr Wallace has thrown himself into local politics, and is standing as the National Front candidate for Handsworth in the local elections. He is also a member of the New Pentecostal Bible Church, Handsworth. Its minister, Peter Deakins, first contacted the Echo last week. "We are very worried about the spread of homosexuality encouraged by this organisation under cover of 'counselling'. We are very pleased that Roger has seen the light."

Mr. Wallace is now cured. But how many other emotionally disturbed people are still at risk? See Echo Comment, page six. Do you want the editorial?

NORTON: No thanks. [*To the others*] You can imagine what it says. "Need for properly qualified medical authorities" – "children at risk" –

SQUIRREL: He's over thirty, for fuck's sake.

TALBOT: NEV says it was on the radio too.

NORTON: They've also called for police action.

TALBOT: Of course you're going to deny it. Fight it.

NORTON: First things first. Without NEV's gear we've got no intercom to the coffee bar, no answering service for out-of-hours and no lights to indicate whether the operators on the phone.

CAROL: We'll get some calls too, after this.

NORTON: It's not going to be very pleasant for the next few days. Weeks even.

TALBOT: It will pass. Eventually.

NORTON: We have to double up immediately, since we won't be able to contact anyone else in the building. I've cancelled everything so I can sit in with whoever is on. Julian, I want you to bully every operator you can get your hands on to fill that rota twice over for the next month.

JULIAN: I think we're going to lose a few. I bet some of them believe the story and resign.

NORTON: Got to try. I don't care if they're trainees, or haven't done it for months, we've got to double up. Carol?

CAROL: Yes?

NORTON: Can you make a new notice for the door of the Switchboard Room? "Lights out of action. Knock quietly and wait to be let in."

CAROL: Sure.

JULIAN: Carrying on? You can't be serious. I reckon this is it. We might as well shut up shop.

- NORTON: Nonsense. We've run without answerphones and stuff before. We don't need the frills. And NEV can bring the gear back when it's all blown over. At least we've still got a phone going.
- JULIAN: For the moment.
- CAROL: What about the files? If the police come...
- NORTON: I took the afternoon off when Jocelyn called me. Got all letters out of the building. They're at my mother's.
- CAROL: What about the information files?
- NORTON: Photostatted. Also at my mother's.
- JULIAN: What if they want to search her?
- NORTON: Have you met my mother? They wouldn't dare.
- JULIAN: And if the phone's tapped?
- NORTON: If it's tapped, it's tapped. I thought of getting the operator to transfer calls to my home phone, but if they tap one, they'll probably tap the other.
- SQUIRREL: And this is the man who said how decent the police had been...
- NORTON: Shut up, Squirrel. You're out of this.
- TALBOT: Don't talk to him like that!
- NORTON: You expect me to congratulate him? *[To JULIAN]* How long till opening?
- JULIAN: *[Looking at watch]* Three quarters of an hour.
- NORTON: Which leaves, as far as I can see, two matters. What to do about the story, and what to do about Squirrel.

TALBOT: Get out a press release immediately. You've got to deny everything.

CAROL: Haven't the press and radio contacted you for a comment?

NORTON: You forget. Squirrel is the Press Contact. It's on all our Press Releases.

TALBOT: Haven't they been in touch with you?

SQUIRREL: I've not been home.

NORTON: Where have you been all day?

SQUIRREL: Just out.

NORTON: Where?

SQUIRREL: Nowhere in particular.

NORTON: And you didn't see the papers? Nobody told you.

SQUIRREL: If you must know, I was down the clap clinic.

TALBOT: Anything serious?

SQUIRREL: Just the catch-all. NSU. Nothing serious. But the queues were horrendous.

NORTON: Didn't anybody say anything? Or recognise you?

TALBOT: From that photo? You must be joking.

NORTON: Didn't they recognise the name at the hospital?

SQUIRREL: I use my so-called real name. David Briggs. My birth name.

NORTON: Well, they may not have caught up with you yet, but you can be sure they will. When you get home there'll be half a dozen reporters on the doorstep, and dozens more by tomorrow. You won't be able to get out of your door in the morning.

TALBOT: You'd better stay over at my place. You'll be safer.

SQUIRREL: I can deal with it. I've got nothing to hide, I'm not afraid.

CAROL: Reporters – National Front – Born-again. Don't be reckless, Squirrel. Stay with Talbot. Or me.

NORTON: You admit the story is true.

TALBOT: No he doesn't. He admits nothing. Don't be ridiculous.

NORTON: He admits he had sex.

TALBOT: Consensual sex.

NORTON: We don't have sex with callers. Why do you make an exception just because he's your friend.

TALBOT: I hope he's all our friend.

NORTON: So tell us what happened, Squirrel –

TALBOT: He's told you –

NORTON: I'm talking to Squirrel. I'm only asking what the police are likely to ask. And I'm asking a lot more nicely than they will.

TALBOT: Lay off him, Norton. *[To SQUIRREL]* Tell me, sugar. Tell me what happened.

SQUIRREL: I'll go now if that's what you want. That's what you want, Norton, isn't it?

TALBOT: You are not going. If you go, I go, so stay put. It isn't fair.

SQUIRREL: Too right it isn't. Years I've put into this place, week in, week out. You all know how hard I work. And now this shit...

NORTON: Did you know this Roger Wallace?

SQUIRREL: You know I did. I did a befriending. Brought him into the Centre a few months ago. You met him.

NORTON: Did I?

SQUIRREL: You too, Julian.

JULIAN: I don't remember.

SQUIRREL: Of course you don't. You ignored him. Both of you.

JULIAN: Oh yes. I remember. Face like a wet weekend in Wigan.

SQUIRREL: That's the one.

JULIAN: Uphill work if ever there was one. Haven't seen him since.

SQUIRREL: And that's why. You ignored him. Everyone ignored him.

CAROL: What I don't understand is, if he was coming down here and everything, how did this happen?

NORTON: Was he the one who kept following you around?

JULIAN: That's the one. Used to sit in the coffee bar for hours, asking people when Squirrel was coming in. Never spoke to anyone.

SQUIRREL: Nobody ever spoke to him.

JULIAN: He was difficult.

- NORTON: Yes, that's the word. Very difficult. He was just one of those people we couldn't do anything for. You have to accept your limits.
- SQUIRREL: So we can only help those nice articulate middle class people who probably don't need our help much anyway. You only want the easy ones.
- CAROL: I tried to talk to him once. He just shrank away. I think he was scared of women. In the end I gave up.
- NORTON: You can't be on duty all the time.
- TALBOT: Why not? Squirrel is.
- NORTON: It was his befriender. If he couldn't cope, he should have referred it to someone else. There are other people.
- TALBOT: You can't say it's Squirrel's fault. He did absolutely everything he could. Is it his fault the Centre's so unfriendly? Is it his fault that gays are shy just like everyone else?
- NORTON: Of course not. We need a proper befriending group.
- JULIAN: From the look of him, I don't think he'd have ever come out. He wasn't the type.
- NORTON: *[Drily]* Obviously not.
- SQUIRREL: He could have had a life of his own. All he needed was confidence.
- TALBOT: And you don't get confidence being eyed up in a coffee bar and nobody talking to you.
- JULIAN: Nobody would eye up Roger, he was a mess.

- TALBOT: Not in that sense. The sort of look which says, "What's that doing in here?" Nobody'll put any work into you unless you're young and pretty.
- NORTON: You knew what he was like. You knew what the Centre could be like. You should have stuck by him, but no, you were distracted as usual and too fucking busy. So you left him to sink or swim. And he sank.
- TALBOT: They have to do something for themselves too.
- NORTON: Look. There are some people we simply cannot help. They're out on a limb, or just socially inadequate. There's nothing we can do about it within our resources. We have our job to do and we can't do another one as well. It's hard, but you just have to let the inadequates go their own way.
- SQUIRREL: Inadequates? We're the inadequates, not them.
- NORTON: You can't take on the whole world, for heaven's sake.
- SQUIRREL: And you decide that for them, do you? Who's an adequate, who's an inadequate? Who's 'one of us' and who isn't. Just say, sorry, but you'll never make it as a homosexual, so why not scurry back into the closet and the cottage, and tough shit. They have a right to a choice. Every choice we can give them.
- NORTON: He had choices, like everyone else. He chose to fall in love with you, and you let him. Then left him flat. What kind of a choice is that?
- SQUIRREL: He wanted so much attention. I couldn't give it to him.
- NORTON: He's found somebody to give it him now.
- TALBOT: This isn't going anywhere, Norton. There isn't time for post-mortems. We need a blanket denial.

NORTON: Wait a minute. Squirrel, has Roger ever been to your house?

SQUIRREL: Yes.

NORTON: Alone?

SQUIRREL: Yes.

NORTON: When?

SQUIRREL: Just after his first call.

NORTON: When was that?

SQUIRREL: Look in the log.

NORTON: I have. I just wondered if he'd called before and you hadn't entered it.

SQUIRREL: What do you take me for? Let's go, Talbot, please.

TALBOT: You must stay. For the sake of Switchboard. You are the heart and soul of it.

SQUIRREL: I can't take any more.

TALBOT: You've given five years of your life. God knows how many people you've helped. Do you want to turn your back on that?

SQUIRREL: No.

TALBOT: Then you've got to stay.

NORTON: So you had your first call Sunday 15th May.

SQUIRREL: Yes.

NORTON: And you met him a few days later?

SQUIRREL: On the Wednesday.

NORTON: Why the fuck did you meet him on your own? You knew there was a scare on.

SQUIRREL: D'you think I wanted to? Julian was meant to be there.

JULIAN: I had a flat battery. I tried to ring you up but there was no answer.

TALBOT: And you couldn't have taken a bus for once in your life?

JULIAN: I would have been late. I thought he'd gone out. I'm kicking myself now.

SQUIRREL: *[To JULIAN]* It's okay. Don't beat yourself up. *[To NORTON]* So what was I meant to tell Roger? Go away and come back when I've got someone with me.

NORTON: And did anything happen?

TALBOT: Whatever you say, we'll believe you. We'll stand by you.

NORTON: We've got to know. They papers will be coming for you.

SQUIRREL: There was no sex.

NORTON: Is that it?

SQUIRREL: I did not have sex.

NORTON: The whole story - ?

SQUIRREL: *[Pause]* I felt his tits.

NORTON: You did what?

SQUIRREL: I felt his tits.

[TALBOT bursts out laughing.]

SQUIRREL: What's so funny about that?

TALBOT: *[Can't stop laughing]* It's so typical. It's very – Squirrel, know what I mean? You didn't want to hurt his feelings. You big softy.

[She hugs him. SQUIRREL starts to laugh too, though reluctantly.]

SQUIRREL: It wasn't funny at the time.

NORTON: It isn't funny now. I'm sorry to spoil the party, but this isn't the end of the matter by any means. Have you any idea how that would sound in court?

[SQUIRREL and TALBOT both cackle.]

TALBOT: "I felt his tits, m'lud." *[They are helpless with laughter.]*

NORTON: Will you two stop treating this as a joke? Soliciting... indecent assault... incitement... conspiracy... corruption of public morals... Two years? Five years? Is that funny?

[They both become serious.]

NORTON: So you felt his tits? In Heaven's name, what were you thinking of?

SQUIRREL: He was about to go. The phone kept ringing. I kept trying to get him to the point where he'd go out, meet someone else. I'd have taken him to *Mary Poppins* if I had to. He lived at home, hadn't had sex for fifteen years, he wouldn't meet anyone, do anything. Totally negative.

NORTON: That doesn't mean you had to pander to him.

SQUIRREL: I was going to lose him. It was that bloody phone.

- NORTON: You could have taken it off the hook. You should have met him somewhere else.
- SQUIRREL: He didn't drink. There wasn't anywhere else. He wouldn't come here. Sure, I could have said, "I'm sorry. It's not what Switchboard is for." Christ, I did say that. You don't think I wanted to play with his stupid tits, do you? But if I had, he'd have gone off, we'd have never heard of him again, until there was a one paragraph story in the *Echo* about a death from an overdose of barbiturates.
- NORTON: Or he could have ring again.
- SQUIRREL: No, not that one. Not the type. But if I went along with him, I thought there was a real chance he'd do what I really wanted him to do afterwards.
- TALBOT: You didn't want to lose him. We've all been there.
- NORTON: You lost him anyway.
- TALBOT: No. We lost him. He sat in the corner, waiting for Squirrel to turn up, and nobody talked to him.
- JULIAN: I tried.
- TALBOT: Not enough. At least Squirrel got him here – that's more than any of you would.
- NORTON: I want you to think very carefully before you answer this one. Was this – er – fondling explicitly sexual?
- SQUIRREL: What do you mean?
- NORTON: *[Exasperated]* You know bloody well what I mean. Did he fucking come?
- SQUIRREL: I don't know.
- NORTON: Don't be ridiculous, you must know.

SQUIRREL: I don't. After a bit – he was sort of sighing and he had his eyes closed – he gave this little grunt and rolled his eyes up into his head, and stopped. Just stopped. And I stopped and he said 'Thank you'. It was all very polite. Then he was really docile.

NORTON: He didn't wipe himself? You didn't see any stain on his trousers?

TALBOT: Euw! Pul-lease!

SQUIRREL: I didn't see anything.

NORTON: As far as the press is concerned, we can issue a denial, and await developments. *[Pause]* Or we can say we're investigating the matter, but in the meantime, the operator has been asked to leave.

TALBOT: Don't be absurd, you can't sack Squirrel.

NORTON: I won't sack him. The group will sack him. It's a collective decision.

SQUIRREL: I've offered to go.

TALBOT: It would be an admission of guilt.

CAROL: Suspend him then. Pending investigation. Then he can come back.

TALBOT: We can't do without him.

NORTON: No-one is indispensable.

TALBOT: *[Shouting at him]* Certainly not you.

NORTON: It's the service we've got to think of first. We can't afford to take risks.

- TALBOT: Of course we take risks. It's just you choose some risks and not others.
- SQUIRREL: Right. Don't give out cottages because people who cottage – people who ask for cottages – aren't our sort of people. You write them off.
- TALBOT: But you risk talking to gay teenagers.
- NORTON: Because they need the kind of service we can provide.
- SQUIRREL: So you play God? How d'you know someone you give a cottage to won't remember us and come back later, because we didn't pass judgement on them? We keep the possibilities open.
- NORTON: And now your way of 'keeping the lines open' gets us closed down.
- TALBOT: He hasn't done anything remotely illegal. You're blowing this up out of all proportion.
- NORTON: Who's the judge going to believe? Squirrel or this Wallace bloke? Who's the jury going to believe? A jury that's been reading the *Echo*?
- TALBOT: Who says the police are going to do anything? A nasty little article in a nasty little rag. It'll be forgotten by tomorrow.
- NORTON: Not if the *Echo* has its way.
- JULIAN: Roger was so obviously a weirdo.
- CAROL: Should we use words like 'weirdo'?
- JULIAN: Well he was.

NORTON: Think, Talbot, think. If Roger's made a complaint, they have to investigate, and there's plenty of police who'd like to?

TALBOT: Is that your 'decent' police?

NORTON: The police will search his flat, maybe all our flats. They'll go through our address books, our shelves – and you know what Squirrel's shelves are like – *Men Loving Men, The Joy of Gay Sex – Gay News, Gay Times, Body Politic, Boston Fag Rag*. Need I go on?

[NEV has come into the room and is standing in the doorway. He puts his electrical gear down.]

SQUIRREL: Can I just say something?

TALBOT: But it's so –

SQUIRREL: Shut up a second, Talbot. I can use my own tongue. All I wanted to say was that as far as Switchboard is concerned, what I did was off my own bat. I'd say that to anybody.

NORTON: Thanks. *[Looks around]* I just want to know one thing. Has anything like this ever happened before? Anything remotely like it?

[Pause]

NEV: Yes. Once. Remember when I first rang up Switchboard? You'll find it in the log. April 14th, 1975. I know it by heart, I've looked at it so often since. "16-year-old boy. Thrown out of home. Parents found magazine under bed. Very upset and confused. Crying a lot. Gave reassurance and talked him down." Duration 131 minutes. Signed – Squirrel

I didn't know where to go. I didn't have anybody I could stay with. Just a number I'd seen on a sticker on a bog

wall. I'd never done it or anything like that. Just thought about it.

What the hell do you do? Squirrel put me up. We talked all that night, it seemed, and most of the next day. He told me about his folks throwing him out too. And his dad beating him up. What it felt like... It was like – I dunno – like a dam bursting. Corny, innit? But true. It just all came out suddenly in a rush. Everything made sense. First time anyone understood. He'd been through the same things, see?

And then second night we fucked. No two ways about it, we fucked. To lie there with a man, a real man, all of my own. After all the dreaming... I didn't think it was happening to me, I couldn't believe it. Talk about jam on it! It was bloody marvellous.

I found a hostel to live next day, got a trainee place at the GPO. And it never happened again. It didn't need to. I knew, and I'd made up my mind. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. And sleeping with him was part of it. That's all I wanted to say. I'll get my gear out to the van now.

[NEV exits. Pause.]

NORTON: Anybody else? Any other 'incidents' we don't know about?

SQUIRREL: No. That's it.

NORTON: You're sure?

TALBOT: You can take his word, for God's sake, Norton.

NORTON: *[Businesslike]* I want to make a formal proposal to this meeting, and I want to make it quite clear that if it isn't accepted I will not be able to carry on as Switchboard Co-ordinator, or indeed as an operator. I want to propose

that Squirrel be barred from Switchboard in any capacity.
Permanently.

SQUIRREL: Do you want me to leave the room?

NORTON: Do you want to leave? You may want to speak in your
own defence.

[SQUIRREL shakes his head.]

NORTON: Anybody got anything they want to say?

[Long pause]

CAROL: I still don't see why we can't deny it.

NORTON: Because it's too close to the truth. This bloke says he
didn't want to, Squirrel says he did. But we have to admit
that something happened. What do you think, Julian?

JULIAN: I'm afraid I agree with Norton. I'm sorry, Squirrel, because
you're a good chap and a bloody fine operator. But we've
got to be above suspicion, and seen to be above suspicion.

NORTON: Exactly.

TALBOT: Scapegoat. You're using Squirrel as a fucking scapegoat.
If you ran it anywhere half-way decently –

NORTON: I don't run Switchboard, the meetings do.

TALBOT: If anybody did their fair share of work around here,
Squirrel wouldn't be rushed off his poor feet and none of
this would have happened.

NORTON: You admit then he was under some stress.

TALBOT: Yes.

SQUIRREL: No.

TALBOT: I don't know.

NORTON: And could do with a break?

TALBOT: Yes.

NORTON: So he's lucked out. It's not the end of the world.

TALBOT: Why all this rush? It's so premature. You're admitting his guilt.

NORTON: It's keeping our house in order, before someone else does it for us. We've got the application in to the Charity Commission, I've already had to rewrite that twice.

SQUIRREL: Oh yes! It has to be 'about' homosexuality, not 'for' homosexuals, because queers don't deserve to have a charity.

NORTON: I don't write the rules, and if we want charitable status, with all the advantages –

SQUIRREL: What advantages? No campaigning, no protesting. You'd put us all in a bloody straightjacket.

NORTON: You're the ones, you two, always complaining about lack of resources, lack of publicity, lack of volunteers, lack of training. If we get to be a charity, a whole load of grants open up to us. Cadbury's, Rowntree's – the council too. We can get better premises, paid workers.

SQUIRREL: And the price?

NORTON: We've been over all this before we agreed to apply.

SQUIRREL: The price?

TALBOT: The price is Squirrel's arse on a plate.

- NORTON: Of course we'll have to be more professional. Get accreditation as a helpline, submit proper accounts, annual report, that sort of thing.
- SQUIRREL: And have outputs and outcomes and service standards and targets, and – heavens to Betsy! – customers, not callers.
- NORTON: What's wrong with raising our game? Of course we should have standards. Professional standards. What's wrong with that?
- SQUIRREL: We're not fucking professionals, that's what's wrong. We shouldn't pretend to be what we're not. *[A realisation]* Now I understand. That's why you're doing this. This is just an excuse, so you can get rid of any opposition to your plans for respectability. For acceptance. And then when you get the grants you can get a nice little paid job as Switchboard manager, and never have to talk to all those messy, untidy little no-hopers who ring us up ever again.
- NORTON: If it's good enough for all the other advice lines – Marriage Guidance and Samaritans, the vicars and the social workers and CSV – it should be good enough for us. We should be objective, we really should.
- SQUIRREL: No, we're better than that. They just stand back and let people talk. Non-directional counselling, they call it. They want to pat your hand and say, 'Yes, dear, isn't it awful.'
- That may be your idea of a switchboard, but it's not mine. I want to get people off their arses and angry and wanting to do something about it. I want to tell them about Gay Liberation and how they can change their own lives and those of other people. All these people ringing us up, paralysed with guilt. All they want is permission – permission to feel, permission to enjoy themselves, permission to fight back. But they'll only take it from someone who's opened up, who's responded to their opening up. You've got to be more than a voice, you've got to be a person, a whole person.

- NORTON: If it solves their problems, yes.
- SQUIRREL: People are not problems. It's not one of your bloody crosswords. All we have to offer them is ourselves – our emotions, our beliefs, our example as positive happy gays who've made something of our lives.
- NORTON: Stop living in the past. The Gay Liberation Front is dead. We need more than good intentions these days.
- SQUIRREL: We have more than good intentions. We have our queer skills.
- NORTON: Don't use that word –
- SQUIRREL: We show them that they must come out for the sake of their sanity, they must fight back against the straightjackets and the bigotry. And we must give them the guts to do it. "Non-directional" be buggered!
- ALEX: He's right. He told me what to do in no uncertain terms, and I'm glad, cos I'd never have done it otherwise. He told me to get laid a lot – and I did – and to go on demonstrations – and I did – to get involved – and I did. He didn't say anything about finding love [*He takes NEV's hand*] – but I did.
- TALBOT: He told you that you were entitled to love.
- NEV: He did that! And he is... [*NEV and ALEX kiss.*]
- SQUIRREL: [*Savage, ironic*] Of course relationships between colleagues in the workplace are not to be encouraged.
- NORTON: We need a vote. I want a vote.
- SQUIRREL: Don't worry. You can keep your fucking switchboard. I wouldn't want to come back if all it's fit for is giving

directions to pubs. The sort of people you want to help don't really need it anyway.

[He slams out.]

NORTON: I still want a vote. For the record. We have to demonstrate responsibility. Julian? Carol?

JULIAN: If it helps with the charity application...

CAROL: I'm sorry, Talbot, but if we can't just deny it...

NORTON: Alex? Nev?

ALEX: Maybe he ought to be suspended for a wee while. Just suspended, for an investigation.

NORTON: You heard what he said. He won't be back.

TALBOT: Do you believe that? He won't be able to stay away. It's his whole life.

ALEX: I can't vote for – no, sorry, Norton.

NEV: Well I can. Stupid idiot, trouble he's caused. All me gear out now, and the risks I ran getting it in the first place.
[To ALEX] Sorry, darling, but I'm with Norton on this one. I know we owe him, but –

NORTON: For barring Squirrel – *[Counts himself, CAROL, JULIAN, NEV]*. Against – *[Counts TALBOT and ALEX.]* That seems pretty clear. Four-six.

TALBOT: You can't. It's not our decision to make. We need eight for a quorum – 25 percent of the membership.

NORTON: I made some calls. Bernard and Angie agree with me. The constitution allows for proxies and postal votes. That brings it up to eight. And 6 – 2 is pretty decisive.

TALBOT: You planned this pretty carefully, didn't you, you cunt.

[NEV and ALEX are deeply shocked by this un-feminist language.]

NEV: Yeah, well, we'd better get this stuff out to the van. *[To ALEX]* Come on, chuck.

[They exit.]

NORTON: What's the time?

CAROL: Ten to eight.

NORTON: Good. Just in time. Who's on tonight?

TALBOT: I am.

NORTON: Are you going to do it?

TALBOT: I don't know.

NORTON: Please, Talbot.

TALBOT: I've got a lot of thinking to do.

NORTON: Can't it wait? There's a phone to answer.

TALBOT: *[Defeated]* I suppose so. Just this once.

CAROL: Do you want me to sit in with you?

TALBOT: Would you?

JULIAN: I'll ring for more volunteers. I can do that from home. *[To TALBOT]* I'm sorry. This is all my fault, really. If I hadn't had a flat battery...

TALBOT: OK, so it's EverReady's fault. Having something to blame puts the world to rights. *[Pause]* I didn't mean that.

JULIAN: I'd better go. *[He exits]*

TALBOT: I hope Squirrel's all right.

NORTON: He can ring Switchboard if he's not.

TALBOT: Get the fuck out of here!

NORTON: He's always got you.

TALBOT: Me with my mop and bucket...

NORTON: Talbot, this was nothing personal.

TALBOT: Just go.

[He gathers his papers in a leisurely way and goes. There is a defiant smugness about him. He knows he is right. As he does so, SQUIRREL reappears.]

SQUIRREL: If you're going to meet that bloke for me, you'd better hurry up.

NORTON: Christ, I'd forgotten all about him.

SQUIRREL: No comment.

NORTON: Where was it again?

SQUIRREL: Under the clock tower. He's about fifty. Marriage just broken up. Name's Andrew.

NORTON: Children?

SQUIRREL: Two.

NORTON: I'll pick the rest up from him. Excuse me. *[He exits hastily]*

TALBOT: Not even a goodbye.

SQUIRREL: He's feeling guilty. Poor Norton.

CAROL: Hey, it's five to eight.

TALBOT: Go ahead. Give me a moment.

[She looks round the room. Picks up the paper again, glances at it, drops it with disgust in a waste paper bin. Looks at the log book. Flicks through, looking for SQUIRREL's entries.]

SQUIRREL: I remember when the council offered us this place, after the dairy went bust. There were old milk churns in the corner, just there. Me and Norton painted this room, just the two of us. Could do with another lick of paint...

TALBOT: Don't even think of it. Not at the moment.

SQUIRREL: We sat in together on the first night we opened, wondering if anyone would call. Waited a whole hour. Like hosting a party and you've got the snacks and the beer keg, and David Bowie's on, and you're wondering if any guests will turn up...

TALBOT: And did they?

SQUIRREL: Two. One in Wolverhampton and one wrong number. He said. *[Pause]* Do you think it would be OK to take some stickers? I thought I could get rid of them on the way home.

TALBOT: *[Firm]* You're not going home, you're coming to mine. I'll see you later.

[She fishes her keys out and gives them to him.]

SQUIRREL: I can still do some stickering. The show goes on.

TALBOT: I must go. You'd best be off.

[She goes to the phone room. SQUIRREL stands a long time alone, then goes and picks some stickers from the box. As he does so, the phone can be heard from next door. He freezes for a couple of seconds, then slowly walks out. The lights gradually fade, as the phone gets louder and louder into the darkness.]

THE END