

A Pot of Tea for Two

A play without interval

by

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For my mother, who never found another way

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CAST

Eileen	A widow of 68. Dishevelled, in her nightie and dressing gown. Prone to drifting away. Working class origins, overlaid with an enforced gentility.
Gerald	Her former husband, now dead. A bully and a snob. A crushing manner and contemptuous of Eileen. He wears a business suit.
Claud	Eileen's younger brother, killed in the war, aged 20. Innocent enthusiasm.
Robert	Her son. They are very close. He is gentle and slightly effeminate.

Robert and Claud are played by the same actor.

SET

A suburban kitchen, morning. Tea things, biscuits. An electric kettle. A sink with working taps, and a draining board. A kitchen table with two chairs. An old-fashioned transistor radio, or a Bakelite mains radio. In a corner an old-fashioned chintz armchair; it looks out of place in a kitchen. There is no door to the kitchen, but lighting creates an area of darkness into which Robert and Claude come and from which they leave.

TIME

It is 1992

A Pot of Tea for Two

Author's note: Don't be afraid to make the audience laugh.

[A Kitchen. A table, kitchen chairs, a kitchen unit along the back, a fridge. A window onto the garden. A man, GERALD, sits in a corner. He is in an armchair, which doesn't belong in the kitchen. It is chintz, everything else is Formica. He reads a copy of the Daily Telegraph. We never see his face, but would guess from his voice that he is in his late 60s. He doesn't move. There is a large Bakelite radio of the 30s/40s on the table. It is playing the Radio 4 early morning farming reports. A woman, EILEEN, also in her late 60s, enters backwards. She is in a dressing gown, and her hair is in curlers. She is dishevelled, perhaps wearing odd slippers. She takes no notice of the man for most of the play.]

EILEEN: Puss, puss, puss. Here, pussy. Where are you?
 Puss, puss, puss. Puuussy.

[She keeps repeating it over and over, in a variety of tones. The effect is grotesque, comic.]

Puss, puss, puss....

GERALD: *[From behind newspaper]* There is no cat.

[The farming reports stop abruptly]

EILEEN: There was a kitten.

I am standing in the yard in my flannelette nightie. It was Elsie's but it was handed down and it's too big for me. I'm frightened I'm going to trip over it in the dark on my way to the kazi. My nightie's got a hole in the sleeve, but Mum has sewn on a bit of lace trim which Elsie didn't have, and that makes me feel better about having Elsie's hand-me-downs. I was warm when I got out of the cot, warm with Claud's warmth, quiet, get up quiet, don't want to wake my baby Claud, but the wind is cutting through my nightie now. I don't like going to the kazi in the night, there's a big spider in the kazi with blotchy legs and one night he's going to get me. I've got a potty under my bed but this is a big job and you can't do big jobs in potties. There it is - there's a tiny mew.

Over there. Behind the dustbin. It is very small and fluffy and it has lost its mum and I don't know where its mum is either so I will be its Mum instead, like I'm Claud's little Mum when big Mum's busy. Puss.....

GERALD: We haven't got a cat.

EILEEN: *[To herself]* What are you saying? We haven't got a cat. You're going. You are, you know. Off her chump, she is. Daft as a brush. Poor old girl. Be talking to herself next, I wouldn't wonder. We haven't got a cat. I haven't got a cat. Must get used to saying "I", it's six months now. Cats, for Heaven's sake. Whatever put that idea in her head? They were talking about cats on "Woman's Hour". Or was it TV-AM? One or the other - well, they're all the same these days, aren't they? Yes, they are.

[Pause. She thinks.]

Puss, puss, puss -

GERALD: There is no cat.

[The WOMAN pauses, comes away from the window.]

EILEEN: She'd like a cat. She would, she'd like a cat. For the company. She's on her own too much. That's why she's going. Poor old thing. They sit on your lap. You can stroke them.

[She strokes an imaginary cat. Sensuous. She feels its fur, hears it purr. She makes for the window again.]

GERALD: There is no cat.

EILEEN: There is no cat. *[With emphasis]* There - is - no - cat. Will you get that into your silly noddle, you stupid old woman? There is no cat. Gerald hated cats. Said they poisoned his roses with their dos.

GERALD: There it is, Eileen. Next door's ginger Tom under the privet. Got his eye on our Ena Harkness. Where's that Fairy Liquid?

EILEEN: Running down the path, squirting water from an old Fairy bottle.

GERALD: Those cats are a blooming pest. Ought to be a law against it. I've a good to give those neighbours a piece of my mind. They ought to keep their pets under control.

EILEEN: There could be a cat. Now. If I wanted.

GERALD: What did you want?

EILEEN: What - ?

GERALD: Why did you come here?

EILEEN: Why - ?

GERALD: Into the kitchen.

EILEEN: She can't answer. "Who's she? The cat's mother?" Puss, puss -

GERALD: There is no cat.

EILEEN: Where am I?

[She picks up the kettle, looks at it, not knowing what it is.]

GERALD: It's a kettle.

EILEEN: Kettle! Kitchen. I'm in the kitchen. It is six-thirty in the morning. I can't sleep. I never sleep. Except when I don't want to. Sometimes they come to her in the night. They stand at the end of the bed. They accuse her. Robert and Claud. She recognises them, but she can't tell which is which. They have Robert's face or Claud's face, but they don't act like Robert or Claud. They keep saying -

GERALD: It was all your fault.

EILEEN: And they wake her up.

GERALD: Kettle.

EILEEN: Funny, some days she finds herself standing in a room, just staring at the wall. And when she realises it, she doesn't know how long she's been stood like that, and she thinks, "What did I come in here for?"

GERALD: What did you come in here for?

EILEEN: Something to do.

GERALD: Go back to bed. Normal people are in bed.

EILEEN: Bed of nails. "She's made her own bed and now she must lie in it".

GERALD: Kitchen.... kettle....

EILEEN: Tea. That's what she meant all along. Why didn't she say so? A pot of tea for Robert.

GERALD: *[With disgust]* Robert.

EILEEN: And Robert's friend. A pot of tea for two. Robert and - what's his name? What's his name? *[Panicking]* What's his sodding name?

GERALD: I don't like hearing a woman using bad language.

EILEEN: This man came up to me in Safeways. Little wire basket. Widower. Shopping for one.

GERALD: Hello, Mrs. Parker. I haven't seen you in ages.

EILEEN: And he's pawing my arm like a cat. Like a cat... Puss -

GERALD: There is no cat.

EILEEN: And he's acting like we're bosom chums, sort of smarmy we used to say, and I can't for the life of me think who

he is, and I'm standing there by the tinned vegetables - Mum used to say, "you know where you are with tinned, don't you?", but then she'd been through the Great War - and I'm not listening to a word he's saying, just thinking, Who are you? Who are you? - but I'm nodding like I'm listening, nodding like a nodding dog in the back of a car, just treading water, so to speak, waiting for it to come back, waiting for a clue, because I don't think I've ever seen him before in my life.

GERALD: Lovely funeral. It must have been a great consolation.

EILEEN: *[Pause]* What funeral?

He looked at me very old-fashioned, and took his hand off my arm like he'd been scalded, and he shook his head and said something about how sorry he was, which could have meant anything, and it was only when I got to the detergents I remembered it must have been Gerald's funeral, and it all came back to me, it was Mr. Briggs from the Bowls Club, and he'd been at the funeral, and I wanted to rush after HIM and tell him it was all right, but I couldn't think of anything to say just, "Oh, you mean *that* funeral?" which sounded daft, like I went to funerals every day of the week and twice on Sundays, so I didn't. I just burst into tears.

GERALD: Stop that.

EILEEN: She couldn't stop herself. She knew everybody must be looking at her, and she felt such a fool, and she was sure she looked a fright, but the tears just poured down her face. Great big silent tears.

GERALD: You cry too much, Eileen.

EILEEN: Not for Gerald, or anything like that, but for me, because I couldn't remember the funeral and Mr. Briggs from the Bowls Club.

GERALD: You're going mad.

EILEEN: I know my Co-op number. E757431.

GERALD: You haven't used the Co-op in years.

EILEEN: I got that when I was twenty. Just after Alamein. Everyone had them. It was like the key of the door, having your own Co-op number. And you got one and fourpence in the pound.

GERALD: You went up in the world.

EILEEN: It's Safeways now, not the Co-op. And you pay with a little plastic card.

GERALD: A Connect Card. A Barclay's Connect card. When are you going to sort yourself out?

EILEEN: It's not the same as the Co-op.

GERALD: There are investments. Policies. Share certificates. Things to be settled.

EILEEN: They say it's the last thing to go. Your co-op number. I went up to Pinetops to see Mother, her last few months. All those old dears, quite gaga. Swinging from the trees they were. But they could all remember their Co-op numbers. Even Mrs. Willoughby, took her clothes off every time she saw a man, 94 if she was a day, even she knew her Co-op number. I don't know my card number.

GERALD: You left all that behind.

EILEEN: Purley. Nearly forty years now. I don't belong.

[The radio plays the "Desert Island Discs" theme tune.]

It was all new then. We looked at the plans. Gerald laid them out on the kitchen table.

GERALD: Three bedrooms, you see. And two toilets, one on the ground, here by the front door. Garden front and back. We can have roses. I've always wanted to grow roses.

EILEEN: There we was -

GERALD: Were

EILEEN: - were - in that filthy attic at thirty bob a week, middle of a power cut, and looking at a new life by candlelight. I'd never had more than two rooms. But now Gerald was going to take me away from all that. On the up and up he was. Going places. Three promotions in five years. Went to night school. Actuarial. Whatever that was. He'd never been happy, born out of his class he was.

GERALD: Just think. We'll never have to go to Hoxton ever again.

EILEEN: We got to see the family, Gerald.

GERALD: They can come to Purley. We'll have plenty of room.

EILEEN: Not all the time. They'll want to ask us in return. Only fair.

GERALD: I don't ever want to see that place again. Grubby kids, grubby houses, grubby minds.

EILEEN: It's my family.

GERALD: Don't argue with me, Eileen. My mind's made up.

GERALD: We can have a lounge and a dining room, see; and I can have a study, on the first floor, in the second bedroom.

EILEEN: What about the children?

GERALD: We haven't got any children.

EILEEN: I mean, in the future.

GERALD: One thing at a time.

EILEEN: We will have children, won't we?

GERALD: When we can afford it. One, anyway.

EILEEN: I'd like lots of children.

GERALD: First things first. I was thinking of putting a garden shed at the bottom. We can have a compost heap too. Hundred feet of garden, just think. It's a snip at the price.

[The Radio stops]

EILEEN: We sat up on the back of the removals van. Huge van, hardly nothing in it.

GERALD: Hardly anything.

EILEEN: Cos most of it was rented.

GERALD: Just think. New furniture. I've never had new furniture before.

EILEEN: Me neither.

GERALD: Neither have I. We'll get it from the Co-op on the HP.

EILEEN: They all came to wave us off. Mum and Dad and Elsie and Bob and Ted and Meg. Like we were going to America or something. It's only Purley, I said. Purley to Bermondsey - what's that? Ten miles? Nothing. *[Sings]* "My old man said follow the van, and don't dilly-dally on the way..."

I wish Claud had been there. I wanted him to tell me I was doing the right thing. His blessing. But he was

somewhere out in the desert and wasn't in a state to
bless nothing - anything.

GERALD: Come on, Eileen, we want to get unpacked before dark.

EILEEN: Bye, Dad. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. Give us a
kiss, Mum. We'll see you when we've settled.

GERALD: I'll give you a ring, Mr. H.

EILEEN: Don't be silly, Gerald. They're not on the phone.

GERALD: No more they are. You've got our number, I hope. Just
in case. Eileen'll drop you a line anyway.

EILEEN: Course I will. Well - Abyssinia, Elsie.

GERALD: Hurry up, Eileen. The driver's waiting.

EILEEN: Bye.

GERALD: Here, let me give you a hand up.

*[The Radio plays the theme from "Housewives' Choice". EILEEN watches
the family recede. She waves.]*

GERALD: God, how did we ever live like that?

[The Radio stops]

EILEEN: He never told the neighbours where we came from.

GERALD: We used to live near the City, because it was handy for
work, but honestly, the rat race was just getting too
much.

EILEEN: Dear Mum,

The house is very nice, but very big and it'll take a lot of
cleaning. We haven't got all the furniture yet, just for
the dining room and our bedroom, but they should be

delivering in the next two weeks. Gerald thinks we should have a refrigerator too. The neighbours are nice, but they're not really my sort of people. I don't know what to say to them half the time. Do come and visit us soon.

GERALD: We should have your Mum and Dad over for tea. Now we've got the three-piece suite.

EILEEN: Gerald used to show off.

GERALD: I'm thinking of getting a washing machine. For Eileen, you know.

EILEEN: They came for the Coronation. So Gerald could show off the television. It was the first television in the family.

GERALD: Sit down, sit down, everyone. Now, who's for a sherry?

EILEEN: We was used to brown ale.

GERALD: Were.

EILEEN: They didn't have a Co-op in Purley. They didn't have anything in Purley. Just big houses on the Downs with big gardens hidden behind big walls. Everything hidden. Secrets. Family secrets. Rotten little secrets.

GERALD: Mustn't tell the neighbours, what would they think?.

EILEEN: And she didn't. She didn't. Even when her heart was breaking, she never told the neighbours *nothing*. She wanted to ring Mum and tell her about Robert, because Mum knew what it was like to miss a son, what with Claud and the war, but she daren't because Mum was going even then, and besides she wouldn't understand, not her generation, she'd have been on Gerald's side, didn't like him but she was frightened of him. And I was scared Elsie'd be secretly pleased because she was always jealous in her heart we'd done well and she

hadn't and she wished Robert was her son, and Meg was so far away in Canada, and neither of the boys would do, only a woman could understand really, so it never happened.

GERALD: You can't go back.

EILEEN: Dear Elsie,

I don't know how to say this, but Robert and Gerald have had a dreadful falling out.....

GERALD: Who are you writing to, Eileen?

EILEEN: No-one, dear.

GERALD: Let me see.

EILEEN: It's nothing, honestly.

GERALD: Then why won't you let me see?

EILEEN: It's nothing. Just a letter.

GERALD: Then give it here. Come on. Let the dog see the rabbit.

[She tears it up.]

EILEEN: There. There's your sodding letter.

GERALD: Eileen!

EILEEN: Are you happy, now?

[She cries. The Radio plays the Henry Hall signature tune. She looks up. Wipes her tears.]

GERALD: Why are you crying, Eileen?

EILEEN: Oh, nothing. It's just sometimes when Mrs. Pepper's out, the house seems awfully big and lonely and I miss

Hoxton.... "Here's to the next time... la, la..."

What you doing here, Claud? You should be at school.

[CLAUD appears in a scruffy school uniform; it is the same actor who plays ROBERT later]

CLAUD: I'm swinging the lead.

EILEEN: You won't half catch it. And the truant officer'll be down on Mum and Dad.

CLAUD: School's boring. Who wants to know about Shakespeare and stuff? There's a war on.

EILEEN: You'll get me in trouble, too. What if Mrs. Pepper comes back? She don't like me having visitors, unless it's my half day.

CLAUD: Mrs. Pepper's a stuck-up old bat.

EILEEN: Don't say that. She's been very good to me.

CLAUD: What? Ten shillings a week?

EILEEN: And board.

CLAUD: Poky little hole in the attic.

EILEEN: It's my own room. I've never had my own room.

CLAUD: She's still a stuck-up bat.

EILEEN: If she comes back she'll hear you.

CLAUD: What? Goes round listening at keyholes, does she?
[Loud] If you're there, Mrs. Pepper, you're a stuck-up old bat.

EILEEN: *[Giggling]* Don't.

CLAUD: That's Henry Hall, isn't it? Give us a dance, Eileen.

EILEEN: I can't. I've got to polish the silver.

CLAUD: The silver can wait five minutes, can't it? Oh, go on. Give us a dance.

EILEEN: She'll hear us.

CLAUD: We'll dance quietly.

[EILEEN dances round the room, on her own. It is a quickstep, and she does the steps properly.]

EILEEN: Oh, stop it Claud, you'll get me the sack.

CLAUD: Come on.

EILEEN: No, Claud. We mustn't.

CLAUD: Where's the harm in it?

EILEEN: Sit down. I'll make you a cup of tea.

CLAUD: But I want to dance with you. You're my best girl, Eileen.

EILEEN: *[Stopping dancing]* And you're my best boy.

[Pause] I'll put the tea on.

[She goes to the kettle. CLAUD dances offstage.]

GERALD: Not yet. Come back here. We only live once.

[The music stops.]

EILEEN: We only live once.

[She has the kettle in her hand. She sucks absently at the spout, as a comfort.]

GERALD: You can't go back.

[She realises what she is doing. Drops the kettle as if scalded.]

GERALD: You're going mad.

EILEEN: *[Quickly]* My name is Eileen May Parker, I am 69 years old. I live at 19, The Glebe, Purley, Surrey CR11 6EP. Today is Friday, 28th August 1992 - Saturday 29th August 1992. My Co-op number is E757431. The name of the Prime Minister is *[Pause]* John Major.

[She picks up the kettle.]

GERALD: It's called Alzheimer's Disease.

EILEEN: *[Plugging in the kettle]* Tea. Robert. And Robert's friend.

GERALD: Bum boy.

EILEEN: I gave them the best bedroom. I gave them our room. My room. She must stop saying "Our", can't get used to it. First time she got a letter addressed to Mrs. E Parker, she cried. It was right, it was etiquette, but she'd been Mrs. G Parker for so long....

GERALD: She'll never get over it. Inconsolable. They were a lovely couple.

[She laughs]

EILEEN: Robert and – and – and – his – friend – they're a lovely couple.

GERALD: They stick it up each other.

EILEEN: Can't use Robert's old room. It's full of junk. Gerald's junk. I must get it cleared. I'm in the back room. It's doing my back in but - Well, it's only for a couple of days. I did do right, didn't I?

GERALD: What's his name? What's the bum boy's name?

EILEEN: I just wish I could remember his name. Irish, I think. Patrick? Very soft-spoken. Lovely manners, and there's not many you can say that of these days. You'd think they'd teach them in the schools, they used to. Respect. Nowadays they'd like as not rape you.

GERALD: Or put you in a home.

EILEEN: She is not going to Pinetops. She is not going like her Mother, choke on her own vomit in a room full of strangers and no-one to answer the bell. She won't. She won't do it. She'll kill herself first, you just see. *[Laughs]* You just try it.

[She goes briskly to the fridge.]

Tea.

[She opens the fridge, looks in.]

Where's the tea? I know we've got some because I said to myself I must get some more tea, Robert's coming and I know he likes his pot of tea, a proper pot and everything, and I know she sometimes comes back from the shops and finds she's forgotten the bread so she has to go all the way back again just for a small white sliced but I made a list specially so I wouldn't. Indian and Earl Grey, just in case. For Robert's friend.

GERALD: Bum chum.

EILEEN: Michael? Sean?

GERALD: You can't remember. They'll put you in the home.

EILEEN: *[Mounting panic]* Where's the tea? Where's the sodding tea?

GERALD: I've told you before, Eileen -

EILEEN: There's two packets in here, I know there is.

[She takes things out of the fridge, puts them on the floor. They include items which should not be there - a pair of nylons, a scrubbing brush, for example.]

Where is it? Come on, woman. If she can't find the tea they'll put her in Pinetops. It's got to be here somewhere. I know it has. It was on the list. Oh Jesus, love me, find the tea, sweet Jesus, I'll be a good girl, I'll go to church, I won't swear and I won't wet my pants. Where's the tea?

[Her voice has risen to a scream. She realises it. Stifles her mouth with a hand.]

Mustn't shout. Mustn't wake them up. Not yet, it's too early. Only babies and old women wake up yet. Mustn't disturb them. Not like that.

I had to slap Robert once. He had a screaming fit. Right in the middle of Sainsbury's.

GERALD: Not enough discipline, that's his trouble.

EILEEN: Not Sainsbury's like you get now where you can't find anything and there's no-one to help you. The old Sainsbury's with a meat counter and a cheese counter like a shop's meant to be and a girl in white overalls behind each and the money flashing over your head in pots on little wires and the smell of cool marble everywhere.

[She goes into a dream. The Radio plays the theme from "Toytown". ROBERT rolls onto the stage in a romper suit]

EILEEN: He's going to choke. He's rolling around on the marble floor and he's going to make himself sick.

[ROBERT continues to scream]

EILEEN: Stop it. Stop it, Robert. I said stop it. Everyone's looking. Robert, if you don't stop that right now, Mummy's going to hit you. Do you hear me? I mean it. I'll hit you right across the legs and then you'll be sorry.

[She slaps the kitchen table, hard. The music stops. The screams change to genuine tears of pain]

EILEEN: Sometimes I dream about those slaps. He comes to me in a dream and he's screaming, and the tears are rolling down his cheeks.

ROBERT: You hurt me, mummy. You hit me and you hurt me. Why did you hurt me?

EILEEN: It wasn't her, it was Gerald, honestly, he's the one who hurt you. He threw you out of the house.

[ROBERT leaves slowly, ignoring her pleas]

She didn't want you to leave, she was crying too.

GERALD: No son of mine –

EILEEN: It was the only time I ever hit him. But it stopped the fit. And he always forgives me. In the dream. If I don't wake up first.

GERALD: It was all your fault. Too soft. Mother's boy.

[EILEEN is calm again. She looks at the things out on the floor. She puts back the things which belong there - the nylons she stuffs in the pocket of her dressing gown almost guiltily, the scrubbing brush she puts in a cupboard. As she does so, she sees the tea and takes it out]

EILEEN: Oh, thank you Jesus. Thank you, thank you. See, I knew I'd got it. She knew she'd got it. They think she's going off her head but she's not. She knew it was on the list. She's not gone yet.

GERALD: Kettle.

EILEEN: Declan. Robert's friend Declan. I knew it would come back to me. It does if you just wait. If you don't panic. Declan. Mum, I'd like you to meet my friend - my boyfriend -

GERALD: Shirtlifter -

EILEEN: My boyfriend - Declan. And he looked me right in the eyes and said, pleased to meet you Mrs. Parker, like he meant it, Robert's told me an awful lot about you, and I said, Nothing good, I expect, and he smiled, and when he smiled his eyes smiled too.

[She goes to a pad. Writes "Declan" on it. Sticks it on the cabinet.]

She can't forget now, not with it right there in front of her nose. Maybe he'd like a boiled egg. I got eggs too. Just in case.

GERALD: Kettle.

[She takes the tea, opens the packet, remembers the kettle. Goes to feel it. It is cold.]

GERALD: You forgot to switch it on.

[She switches it on.]

You're not safe.

EILEEN: Tea. Milk. Sugar. Strainer.

[She writes them in a list on the pad.]

GERALD: You left the saucepan on. Forgot it.

EILEEN: Two cups, two saucers, two teaspoons.

GERALD: The whole place was filled with smoke. Baked beans, I seem to recall.

EILEEN: Slops basin.

GERALD: You could have choked to death.

EILEEN: Biscuits.

GERALD: Or burned to death.

EILEEN: Teapot.

GERALD: Might have been a relief, of course. Put you out of your misery.

EILEEN: How could I forget the teapot?

GERALD: You're not safe.

EILEEN: Got to get it right, or they'll put you in Pinetops. Got to get it right for Robert and Robert's - Declan. Robert and Declan.

[The Radio plays the Armistice Day service. ROBERT, now adult, appears]

EILEEN: Claud - what you doing here? You're dead.

ROBERT: It's not Claud, Mum. It's Robert.

EILEEN: Silly of me. You look just like Claud in this light.

ROBERT: Careful, Mum, people will think you're off your rocker.

EILEEN: Oh, Robert. *[She is weepy.]* I don't know what to say. How did you find out?

ROBERT: Auntie Elsie.

EILEEN: Of course.

ROBERT: I had to come. Even though he was an old bastard.

EILEEN: That's no way to talk about your father.

ROBERT: He's dead, Mum.

EILEEN: I know, I know. *[She is weepy again.]*

GERALD: Was it difficult?

EILEEN: After the second stroke, well, yes. All the lifting. And he was incontinent. Sometimes I thought I'd never - And him sitting there couldn't move, couldn't speak, just his eyes following you and hating you? Hating you for what he'd become.

GERALD: You should have told me.

EILEEN: How?

GERALD: Auntie Eileen. I could have helped.

EILEEN: How? Changed his pyjamas and his sheets? He wouldn't have you in the house, let alone touching him.

GERALD: He couldn't have stopped me.

EILEEN: You think I'd do that to him? I'm his wife.

GERALD: Was.

EILEEN: Was. *[Pause]* I never forgave him for what he did to you.

ROBERT: Don't worry, mum. That's all in the past. I'm not bitter, honest. I never wanted things like that. And now he's gone, we can be together again. But you've got to take me as I am. I can't pretend any more, I'm too old for all that.

EILEEN: I don't know what to do. I've never been on my own

before. We were eight at home, and after that it was always your father.

ROBERT: You'll be alright. I'll look after you. Not many left, are there? For the funeral, I mean... *[Indicates the funeral congregation vaguely]*

EILEEN: We kept ourselves to ourselves. Especially towards the end.

ROBERT: Who are these people?

EILEEN: I don't know. From the Mutual, I suppose.

ROBERT: Will we have to talk to them?

EILEEN: I suppose so.

ROBERT: I'd rather talk to you.

EILEEN: There'll be time later. We'd better go and look at the flowers. It's expected.

[The Radio stops]

Thank you for coming.

And you must be - Gerald never talked about work.

[ROBERT goes to greet one of the mourners, and goes offstage.]

GERALD: You wouldn't be interested.

EILEEN: I never met the people he worked with.

GERALD: Never mix business and pleasure.

EILEEN: Thirty-six years. Left the house at ten past eight. Just after the news. That was before they changed it. Home in time for the shipping forecast.

GERALD: I'm home, dear.

EILEEN: Same words every night. "I'm home, dear." Should have made it into a tape recording. Save the bother. At first I used to ask him, how's your day been, dear? But I soon gave that up.

GERALD: Let's not talk about it.

EILEEN: Eight hours a day, five days a week, thirty six years. Not including Christmas and holidays. How many hours does that make? Robert could tell you, quick as a flash. Always good at mental arithmetic, he was, took after his father with that. But I never had the faintest idea what Gerald was doing. Something to do with figures and insurance.

GERALD: Earning a crust.

EILEEN: That's all he ever said.

GERALD: Keeping you in the style to which you are accustomed.

EILEEN: He could still joke then.

GERALD: Keeping a roof over your head.

EILEEN: And what did I do? All those years. Eight hours a day, five days a week, thirty-six years.

GERALD: You kept a nice home.

EILEEN: I can't remember.

GERALD: It was always spotless. I was never ashamed. A wife to be proud of.

EILEEN: I remember Robert.

[The Radio plays the theme from "Listen With Mother"]

Teaching him to read. "Puppy wakes up. He stretches himself. He shakes himself...." What did puppy do next?

GERALD: I don't know. I wasn't there.

EILEEN: I know he sniffed at a bee somewhere along the line. And I think he chewed some slippers on the way too. We did laugh. And Deep Sea Mokey. There was a squid in that. Who lisped. *[Lisping]* Cecilia Squid, I think it was. "And as she went she slithered and slid." She had chilblains too. "Nobody nobody nobody knows what it's like to have chilblains on my kind of toes." You loved that, Robert. I'd bounce you on my knee, and you'd roll around and giggle till I thought you'd choke. I wonder if you remember.

[The Radio stops. Pause]

I sewed nametapes, I remember that. Name tapes on everything. And I sewed your little gloves onto the end of the arms of your little raincoat. You went off to school. You cried. I cried. And wondered what I was going to do with myself, in the house, all on my own.

GERALD: My tea was always on the table.

EILEEN: I wanted to help with your homework, Robert. Maps was fine, because that was just tracing, and I'd done all that with dress patterns during the war. Utility frocks and blackout bloomers. And I was always good at drawing anyway, so we managed in Nature Study. But French and maths and history - I really wanted to help, Robert -

GERALD: He's got to do it for himself. He can't rely on you to hold his hand the rest of his life.

EILEEN: You were so bright, Robert. And always laughing as a baby. Gerald should have played with you more.

GERALD: I had to bring work home from the office. They relied on me.

EILEEN: The two of them. One at each end of the dining table. The Monday Play on the radio. Steam rising from the iron as I did the ironing. I didn't understand what Gerald was doing.

GERALD: Don't you worry yourself about that.

EILEEN: And Robert's school books were getting too complicated as well. I looked them both, their heads over their books, and I thought, I'm living with two men, and they're both strangers.

GERALD: *[Laughing]* You do get some funny ideas, Eileen. Must be your time of life.

EILEEN: And daytimes? All I can remember is the quiet. Suburbs are so quiet. Four walls, and nothing but Woman's Hour to keep the silence away. Robert at school, Gerald at the office. There was the daily, of course, later on, after Robert went to college.

GERALD: It's about time you put your feet up, Eileen. We're none of us getting any younger.

EILEEN: It's not as if I'm rushed off my feet. Now Robert's away, there's hardly anything for me to do as it is.

GERALD: You mustn't devalue yourself.

EILEEN: I don't need a woman around the place. She'll get under my feet.

GERALD: She'll do the heavy work.

EILEEN: What heavy work?

GERALD: I don't know.

EILEEN: I don't want a stranger in my house.

GERALD: She won't be a stranger. She does for the Briggses too. They say she's very reliable. And what's good enough for Mrs. Briggs is certainly good enough for my Eileen.

EILEEN: I was always frightened of her, and I don't think she approved of me, I used to go round Hoovering before she got here, so she wouldn't think the house was in a state.

Dear Robert,

We have a new cleaning woman, so I am quite the lady of leisure! The garden is looking a bit bare, what with the time of year, but I've been clearing up the leaves for something to do. I hope college is going well, your father and I are very proud of you. I enclose some special offer tokens which I cut out of the newspaper because I know money is tight. I know how busy you must be but it would be nice to hear from you, just to know you are all right. We went to bridge on Thursday, but I'm afraid I disgraced myself in three no trumps and went four off. Your father was not pleased! Are you coming home at Christmas? I imagine they'll want your college room during the holidays for conferences or something, but you know there's always a place for you, we keep your room just as you left it.

[The kettle has boiled]

GERALD: Kettle.

[She unplugs the kettle and pours the water carefully into the sugar bowl]

EILEEN: What did she do? How did she make the hours go? In a dream, most of the time.

GERALD: Penny for them.

EILEEN: What?

GERALD: Penny for your thoughts.

EILEEN: I can't remember. I've lost the thread.

GERALD: Sometimes I don't know where you are.

EILEEN: Reading, mending, sewing. Planning for meals, shopping for meals, cooking the meals, washing up after the meals. Seems like as soon as you'd finish one you'd start thinking about the next one. It passed the time. But she don't remember any of it.

GERALD: Doesn't.

EILEEN: Doesn't. Shelves were Gerald, I know that. Shelves were man's work. And fuses. I've always been scared of electricity. And heights.

GERALD: And going mad. Like your mother.

EILEEN: And going - it comes and goes. When it's coming she knows it's coming. Everything looks - different. She looks at something and she can't put a name to it. Even the simplest things. She doesn't know what they're for. Shapes. Everything's just shapes. And there's no meaning to any of it. And then it happens and then she doesn't remember. She sees it all afterwards, and she sees what a mess she's made, and she doesn't realise it's her, she thinks I did it, but I didn't, I didn't. It was somebody else. But I clear it up and pretend it didn't happen.

GERALD: You can't keep it from Robert.

[Pause]

EILEEN: That's the worst, knowing it's coming. If I didn't know, I wouldn't care.

GERALD: He'll put you in Pinetops.

EILEEN: Let me go, let me go.

[She shakes her head violently]

I do not want the darkness. I will not go down there. I will not sink into the nothing and let it - Robert! Robert! *[She covers her mouth.]* Mustn't wake Robert. And Robert's friend - *[Looks at paper]* - Declan. Got to get it right. Got to be careful. Robert mustn't know. We've got to tell a little white lie, haven't we, Eileen, play a little trick on our baby. Yes. Must not know. Not yet. Mustn't.

[She takes the tea and spoons it into the pot. She stirs the leaves. There is no water]

GERALD: Water.

[She picks up the kettle. It is empty. She fills it. She puts the kettle on again]

EILEEN: Didn't I - ?

GERALD: You did.

EILEEN: Put it in the –

[She sees the sugar bowl, realises, bursts into tears]

I want to get it right. I do try. I try so hard. But there's nothing I can - nothing. *[Fierce]* Ought to be locked up. She's a danger to herself. She's not fit to be out on her own. Lock her in the loony bin. Put her in Pinetops. It's for her own good.

I am sixty-eight. That's not old, for heaven's sake, not these days. You see them all down the W.I. Widows. Just like me. Women in hats. Collecting for flag days. Going on trips to Eastbourne. Saving whales, protecting cats....

[She makes the stroking gesture again]

GERALD: Where's that Fairy Liquid?

EILEEN: The world is full of them. You see them down the High Street every day. Shopping for one. Survivors. Go on for ever. Go till they drop, full of energy, full of curiosity. Why me? It's not fair.

GERALD: Life's not meant to be fair.

EILEEN: Peaceful in the Cottage Hospital. That's what I always imagined. Crisp white, sun streaming behind flowered curtains, Robert holding my hand by the bedside.

[The radio plays the Christmas Eve Service from Kings College Chapel. ROBERT enters with his rucksack.]

GERALD: Hello, Mum.

EILEEN: Robert! I was just thinking. The carols set me off. This is from Kings College, and you're at college.

ROBERT: Not King's...

EILEEN: How you've grown. Or is it me that's shrunk? You're thin, though. You're not feeding yourself properly, I can see that.

ROBERT: I feel fine.

EILEEN: Here, let me look at you.

ROBERT: *[Embarrassed]* Let me get my coat off.

EILEEN: Is that your college scarf? Nice colours. No, don't worry about that. I'll take your rucksack up later.

ROBERT: You don't need –

EILEEN: You sit yourself down and relax. You must be tired after

your journey. I'll just put the kettle on. Then you can tell me all about it. Have you made lots of friends? Have you met any nice girls?

ROBERT: *[Avoiding the question, indicating rucksack]* I think I'll take that upstairs. It's only in the way there.

[Exits with the bag.]

EILEEN: You were always the shy one.

GERALD: Kettle.

[The radio stops. She fills the kettle automatically from a water purifying jug. Plugs it in as she talks]

EILEEN: I could kill myself. Be cleaner.

GERALD: No, you couldn't.

EILEEN: I did before. Because of what you did to Robert.

GERALD: No you didn't.

EILEEN: I tried to.

GERALD: I found you.

EILEEN: I didn't have the right pills then.

GERALD: Snoring on the settee.

EILEEN: Or not enough.

GERALD: You'd vomited on the persian rug. Disgusting.

EILEEN: I've got enough now. Just in case.

GERALD: You went to hospital. An ambulance came. Right outside the front door. Neighbours watching through the nets.

EILEEN: But I'm glad I didn't. Didn't then. I had to live. For Robert. Cos, I knew he'd be back one day and I knew he'd need me then. All boys need their mothers.

GERALD: No, nothing serious. She slipped off a ladder. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to look at.

EILEEN: I hate ladders.

GERALD: She'll be home in a day or two.

EILEEN: I came round in the cottage hospital. There was a nurse bending over me. I thought she was a nun. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

GERALD: They didn't believe me.

EILEEN: They looked at me funny when I came back. In the post office. Sort of pitying. They spoke gentle, but they were scared. I could feel it. Didn't want to touch. Might catch - whatever it was.

GERALD: Despair.

EILEEN: They're starting to do it again. Mr. What's-His-Face in the supermarket. Well - FUCK HIM!

[She clasps her hand over her mouth again, shocked at her own profanity. Glances at the ceiling]

GERALD: From the gutter to the gutter. Full circle. It's a sign.

EILEEN: They were at the funeral. Next door. Spoke in hushed tones. "So sorry.... anything we can do.... " Too late then, wasn't it? Fifteen years too late. A death too late. Watching behind the curtains. Watching Robert walk out. Gerald shouting down the path after him.

[ROBERT re-appears with his rucksack and crosses the stage slowly, ignoring the dialogue.]

GERALD: And don't ever bother to come back.

EILEEN: And me tugging on his arm, crying, Don't listen to him, he doesn't mean it, he's just upset, I'm sure he doesn't mean it, you're his son.

GERALD: You stay out of this, Eileen.

EILEEN: It's Christmas, Gerald. You can't throw your own son out on the streets at Christmas. Where's he going to go? What's he going to do?

GERALD: He's not my son.

EILEEN: How can you say such a thing?

GERALD: I know what I'm doing.

EILEEN: What is all this? Why are you behaving like this? What's happened?

GERALD: I'll explain later.

EILEEN: I've got a right to know.

GERALD: Don't make a scene, Eileen.

EILEEN: Don't I have any say in it? This is my son. Our son.

GERALD: I have no son.

EILEEN: But what's he done?

GERALD: Quiet, Eileen. The neighbours will hear.

EILEEN: Sod the neighbours.

GERALD: Eileen!

EILEEN: You heard me. You are throwing my son out of our

house, and you won't even tell me why.

GERALD: Get back in there. Dammit, Eileen, I'm your husband. I order you to get back inside.

EILEEN: Where will you go? What will you do? Think of me, Robert, I'm your mother. What about me?

GERALD: You're making yourself ridiculous.

EILEEN: And Robert not even looking back. One small rucksack, that's all he took. And his room here -

GERALD: Burn it. Burn everything.

EILEEN: Even the photos in the family albums. Anything with Robert in. There's still the gaps in the albums, square patches lighter than the rest, fading now of course. What he couldn't burn he put in the back of the Volvo, took down the Tip. And he still wouldn't, he still couldn't tell her what it was that happened.

GERALD: He never existed.

EILEEN: Nothing left. A bare room. Not Robert's room now, the spare room, the junk room, any old rubbish into it. Sometimes I'd go and sit in it, in among the junk, just to remember what it used to be like when it was Robert's room.

GERALD: We have no son.

EILEEN: I've still got his school certificates. Hid them where Gerald couldn't find them. I thought Robert might need them one day.

GERALD: I told you not to mention that name.

EILEEN: For a job or something. Funny, he never did. He's never asked for them. Maybe they don't ask to see your Certificates any more. They always used to, even for

Service. "Can I see your certificates?" said Mrs Pepper, silly woman, too many pearls. "I haven't got any. I've got a note from school." "Eileen is a bright and capable girl, thoroughly conscientious and reliable. I'm sure she will make an excellent servant." I didn't have shorthand and typing. What else was there? Besides, service was live-in, one less in the house. Mrs. Pepper was a tartar, but it was only Dulwich Village so it was easy for Hoxton on your half day. Walk to Liverpool Street, then a 42 bus. They're more trusting now, perhaps. I must give them to Robert. The certificates. As a souvenir or something. Later.

GERALD: He won't want them. They'll embarrass him. You're an embarrassment.

EILEEN: Just in case.

[The kettle is boiling again. NOTE: It is a kettle without an automatic cut-out.]

GERALD: Kettle.

EILEEN: I should have stayed on. I should have got certificates.

GERALD: Kettle.

[She unplugs the kettle, puts water into the teapot this time, stirs it absently]

EILEEN: I was bright. Miss Havergill said so. "Such a pity you have to leave us. You're such a bright girl." Fourteen, I was. So many things I'll never know.

GERALD: You needn't bother yourself with all that.

EILEEN: Robert had to go to college. I was set on it. All my life, I've looked at the world through blinkers. I've never understood the half of it.

GERALD: You're a woman.

EILEEN: Robert tried to explain calculus. I never understood. I never understood anything after the third year. I don't know my own son. Does he take sugar? I can't remember. Does - Robert's friend? Best be safe.

[She finds some old sugar lumps in a drawer, in wrappers, taken from various restaurants over the years. She puts them on a saucer]

Just in case.

[She looks in the teapot, stirs it. Looks at her list]

Tea, sugar, cups.

[She goes to the cupboard and takes out two soup bowls.]

GERALD: Cups. Handles.

[She feels the edge of the two soup bowls uncertainly. Puts them down hard. Searches for cups and finds them. Lays them carefully]

GERALD: Saucers.

EILEEN: I suppose Robert must have had a lot of - friends. It's not as if he's a boy any more. He's -

[Pause]

We'd just moved to Purley.

[Radio: "This is the BBC Home Service. Here is the news, and this is Alvar Liddell reading it."]

EILEEN: Mr. Churchill had just resigned. He'd seen us through the war, but now he was old and deaf and he'd had a stroke and he was going gaga, nobody said but everyone knew. Time to get rid of him. Time to put him out to grass. Poor old soul, daft old sod. Mayday Hospital, 1955. May 3rd. He's 37 now! I can't believe it. He's been a man nearly twenty years.

GERALD: Old enough to know better.

EILEEN: Old enough to know his own mind.

GERALD: He chose evil. I will not condone evil.

EILEEN: Though you always think they're thirteen at most. In your mind, that's how you always see them.

GERALD: Had the gall to boast about it. To my face. Nothing gay about it, I said. Nothing but filth and disease and shame on the family.

EILEEN: Always in shorts. Flannel shorts with little blue legs in the winter which you rub vaseline on. Never in long trousers.

GERALD: Trousers down, round his ankles.

EILEEN: But they grow out of short trousers whether you like it or not, they cover their hairy legs and their bushes sprout and their peepees grow, and they start doing things they shouldn't -

GERALD: What do I tell the neighbours? What do I tell your mother? It'll be the death of her.

EILEEN: - but you see the stains on the sheets and you wash the sheets but you don't say anything -

GERALD: Is that what you want? Do you want to kill your mother?

EILEEN: And they don't say anything because they've got their own lives to lead and their own secret thoughts -

GERALD: Not one word, do you hear me? Don't you breathe a word.

EILEEN: - and you don't know anything, anything at all about

them. *[Pause]* They have lots of - friends - don't they?

GERALD: Bum chums.

EILEEN: They're noted for it.

GERALD: Pick-ups. Tarts. Nancies.

EILEEN: He always had a special friend. As a boy. Not always the same one, but - there was always one. David Moreton. He was the first. Came back with Robert for milk and biscuits after school. Michael Weinstein. Howard Malin. Always boys. I wonder if they... even then... well, they could have. Up in his room for hours, they were, music on full blast.

[The Radio plays Radio Luxembourg]

They could have been doing anything for all I know. I'd never intrude.

GERALD: Too soft.

EILEEN: I've always believed in privacy. Even if you're only little, you've still got a right. I always knocked.

[She knocks on the table]

ROBERT: *[Offstage]* What is it?

EILEEN: Can I come in?

GERALD: Wait a minute.

[A long pause. The Radio goes off. ROBERT appears in his underpants.]

ROBERT: What do you want?

[Freeze. Lights change. ROBERT has gone]

EILEEN: They start younger and younger these days. You read

about it all the time. But it wasn't these days in those days. No. He was too young. I think.

GERALD: Spoons. For the sugar.

[She takes spoons out of the drawer, setting them on saucers]

EILEEN: Thirteen years it's been. Thirteen years! Never forgave him - us. College, then his first teaching. I missed his graduation. I'd have liked to see him in his cap and gown. He's Head of Maths now, it's them in short trousers, not him, not that they wear short trousers any more, not even the little ones. And he never even wrote, not once. Unless -

GERALD: I tore them up.

EILEEN: Every morning, I'd listen for the post. Plop on the mat. Quarter to eight, regular as clockwork. We'd got a proper postman then, now it's different. Young chap. Doesn't even wear a uniform. Doesn't like getting up in the morning, they don't, the youngsters, didn't have to go through the war, ARP duty would have killed them, and he doesn't get round sometimes till half past eleven, what's the use of that? You want to open your letters over your breakfast. Anything for me, Gerald?

GERALD: Just bills. Nothing for you.

EILEEN: There never was.

GERALD: He stopped writing after a while.

EILEEN: But I kept hoping. Every day. For years and years.

GERALD: Just something from the AA about insurance.

EILEEN: Maybe today, I thought to myself.

GERALD: Do we want any Christmas cards from "Save The Children"?

EILEEN: He can't forget me just like that. It's not my fault.

GERALD: Holiday brochures already, and it's not even Christmas.

EILEEN: And I'd think of him going off to school every day just like he used to, except now he was standing up in front of the class. And I used to ache in the pit of my stomach, feeling so empty and alone behind the net curtains, like we're all alone behind the net curtains in this street, every one of us, they'd sooner call social services and there's nothing - nothing - they'd do to lift a finger, they're too scared of doing the wrong thing and we all see it coming but we can't stop it, just look out behind the net curtains as the ambulance comes to take you away while someone says you've fallen off a stepladder. And they'd shake their heads and maybe if they'd spoken to you in the shops they'd slip a little card through the letter box, don't want to intrude, don't want to make a fuss, don't want to put a foot wrong, and God when is it ever going to change? Somebody's got to make the first move. But not me. She daren't. She's too far gone. She daren't. They'd talk, they'd think she was mad.

GERALD: You are mad.

EILEEN: My name is Eileen May Parker -

GERALD: Milk.

[She takes milk out of the fridge as she speaks, lifts the lid of the teapot, and pours the milk in. It spills over the table.]

EILEEN: My name is Eileen May Parker, I am 69 years old, I live at 19 The Glebe, Purley, Surrey. Today is Saturday 29th August 1991, the name of the Prime Minister is John Major, my Co-op number is E757431.

GERALD: See? Mad.

EILEEN: We used to have a copper. In the corner of the kitchen. Big wooden lid. And a hole for the coal fire underneath. It took forever to get lit. Kitchen full of smoke. Dad huffing and puffing at the grate. Then you'd have to stand on a stool and stir all the sheets with a long wooden pole. Smell of steam and hot cotton....

[The Radio plays the Theme from "Radio Newsreel". EILEEN stands on a chair, stirring over the table. Enter CLAUD.]

CLAUD: What you doing up there?

EILEEN: What's it look like I'm doing, Claud? I'm stirring the copper.

CLAUD: You shouldn't be doing that. It's your day off.

EILEEN: I want to help. I mean, now Mum's down the Munitions.

CLAUD: You get enough of that with Mrs. Pepper.

EILEEN: You and Meg and Elsie should help more.

CLAUD: Leave it out. I'm at school.

EILEEN: When did you ever go to school?

CLAUD: I got to now, you got to have maths, get in the Air Force.

EILEEN: You can't go in the Air Force, you're too young.

CLAUD: I can lie about my age.

EILEEN: You wouldn't. They'd catch you.

CLAUD: We got a letter from Ted, there's lots of blokes on his convoy, sixteen or even less. They don't ask questions. Need all the blokes they can get. One volunteer's

worth two pressed men.

EILEEN: That's the Navy. That's different.

CLAUD: No it's not. They're crying out everywhere.

EILEEN: You'd look good in light blue. Match your eyes.

CLAUD: Just think, Eileen. A Hurricane pilot. Climbing into the sun, up into the clouds, bank, get Jerry in your sights, then - rat-tat-tat-tat

EILEEN: Rat-tat-tat-tat

CLAUD: Drop like a stone, out of the sun, clouds rushing past, hard on his tail

EILEEN: Rat-aat-atat

CLAUD: left engine on fire - he's faltering - close in -

EILEEN: Boom!

CLAUD: Shoot his tail off, then drop to the left, aim up

[EILEEN makes more aeroplane noises]

CLAUD: Sights on the undercarriage, on the petrol tank - and squeeze -

BOTH: Kaboom!

[They laugh]

EILEEN: Look what you made me do. A grown woman behaving like a silly schoolgirl. Ought to know better.

CLAUD: It's serious, Eileen. I'm serious.

EILEEN: Do it.

CLAUD: You mean it?

EILEEN: Cross my heart. And when you get up there - and you get Fritz in them sights, give him one from me. Give him one from all of us in this street for all his cowardly bombs and his terror and his - his - stopping the tubes running on time.

CLAUD: Cor. You should have been in the flicks. The way you looked just then was a picture.

EILEEN: Give over. I mean it, though, Claud. We owe them a few. Do what you think best.

[CLAUD kisses her on the forehead, salutes only half-joking, and exits]

GERALD: He can't help you now.

[The Radio stops. EILEEN fishes a letter out of her pocket. Reads -]

EILEEN: Dear Mrs. Henderson,

It is with deep regret that I have to inform you that your son, Flight Sergeant Claud Henderson, has been shot down over Egypt and is missing presumed -

EILEEN: Oh Mum – oh Mum – *[screams]* he can't be...

CLAUD: *[Offstage]* It was your fault. You egged me on.

EILEEN: If it wasn't for me -

CLAUD: And just because you thought I'd look good in light blue.

EILEEN: I went looking for him - there's a place near Runnymede. Huge white building, names all round the walls. Roll of honour.

[CLAUD appears in his uniform]

CLAUD: I'm not there.

EILEEN: The African boys have their own in Egypt.

CLAUD: You'll never find me. It's too far.

EILEEN: We waited and hoped. Mum never gave up hope. Has the letter come yet, she'd ask in Pinetops. Not yet, mum, I'd say. Day before she died, last time I saw her, she said, any news, and I knew what she was talking about. And I said, Mum, Claud's dead. He's been dead these thirty years now, you stupid woman. I don't know what made me say it, that one time, and her so near the end. Wicked girl, she said. Wicked evil girl, you're killing your own mother.

You must never kill hope. And I killed hope, sure as I killed Claud.

He still comes to me in the night. Terrible wounds. Blood streaming from his head. I take his poor hurt head in my hands, and there is blood trickling over my fingers.

CLAUD: *[Clutching his side]* Help me, Eileen. It hurts. Make it stop hurting.

EILEEN: There is blood in my dreams.

CLAUD: I can't stand the pain. Make it go away.

EILEEN: I don't want to hear. I don't want to know.

CLAUD: You used to kiss it better.

EILEEN: Stop it. Stop it. Leave me in peace.

[She is shouting. ROBERT leaves]

GERALD: If that doesn't wake Robert -

EILEEN: Claud and Robert. Funny, all those years Robert was

gone, I kept thinking of Mum, waiting for Claud like me waiting for him. Robert. Missing presumed alive.
Missing presumed -

GERALD: Queer.

EILEEN: Let's call him Claud.

GERALD: Who?

EILEEN: The baby, silly. If it's a boy.

GERALD: Now, then. You know we agreed on Robert.

EILEEN: You agreed on Robert.

GERALD: It's got to be Robert. Out of respect. My father was Robert.

EILEEN: But Claud -

GERALD: I know what Claud was. I wish you wouldn't harp on it so. But what kind of name is that to give a boy in this day and age?

EILEEN: Well, as a middle name....

GERALD: We've left all that behind us now. The past best left where it is. Dead and buried.

EILEEN: I wonder if he'd have turned out different if he'd have been a Claud.

There's not many these days called Claud. He'd probably have been bullied at school if he'd have been Claud. I mean, even more than he was. And he was, I know he was, though he wouldn't say so. He was always shy, and they're the worst, bottle it up, turn it in on themselves. You could see the bruises coming up when he came out of the bath.

[ROBERT in the doorway in his underpants. EILEEN rubs his shoulders with a bathroom towel.]

What's that?

ROBERT: What's what?

EILEEN: That. That on your leg. On your shin. Let me have a look at it.

ROBERT: It's nothing, Mum.

EILEEN: Let me just look.

ROBERT: Leave it, Mum. I just bumped against a desk, that's all.

[He shrugs her off and exits.]

EILEEN: But I knew. You can't fool a mother.

GERALD: It's high time he learnt to stand up for himself. Can't go hiding behind your apron strings the rest of his life.

EILEEN: But if he's being bullied.... We should see the teacher.

GERALD: And what would Robert say if we went running to his teacher? He'd say we were showing him up, that's what. No, he's got to learn to take care of himself.

EILEEN: Gerald started to teach him boxing. Self defence. Robert was never keen. Then Gerald hit him. By accident, I think. Right on the nose. And Robert burst into tears. Ran away, hid on the allotments all day, didn't come back till well after dark, I was sick with worry, but Gerald wouldn't let me go and look for him.

GERALD: He'll come back. Tail between his legs. You'll see.

EILEEN: Wouldn't learn boxing any more. Wouldn't come near his father for weeks.

GERALD: No backbone. Mother's boy.

EILEEN: That's when it all started. Between Robert and Gerald. Robert never trusted his father again, and Gerald wouldn't - couldn't - believe the boy wasn't doing it on purpose.

GERALD: A man wants a son to follow in his footsteps. It's only natural.

EILEEN: He takes after his mother. That's what they used to say. Gerald used to wince, every time they said it.

[She has been stirring the teapot all this time. She stops. Puts the spoon in the saucer. She sees that the little puddle of tea is the wrong colour. She looks in the pot.]

GERALD: Can't do the simplest things. A danger to herself.

EILEEN: *[Crying]* Is there no end to it? While she's in it, she's in it and it seems like she'll never get out of it, and it's a mercy really that she doesn't know she's in it, but the worst is, the very worst is when she's coming out and she knows she's been in, and she gets so scared of what's happening to her and she knows sometimes she ought to kill herself because it's only going to get worse, yes, the worst is yet to come and how, and she would if it weren't for the thought of Robert and what he would think and how he'd explain it, and it would make him ashamed of her. And then sometimes just when she's coming out and she realises she's been in, she goes back in almost because she wants to, she wants to hide, because coming out is so much worse than being in and not knowing.

GERALD: No point in fighting it. What makes you think you're so special? Nursing homes are full of people just like you.

EILEEN: She is not going back in. She is going to get it right. All morning if she must.

GERALD: He's not going to stay in bed all day, just waiting for you to bring him a cup of tea.

[She takes the tea pot, empties it. Puts the kettle on again]

GERALD: It's too late now.

EILEEN: *[Writing on a piece of paper again]* Boil kettle, warm teapot, put tea in teapot, put water in teapot, put milk in jug, put sugar in sugar bowl, put biscuits on plate. Two cups, two saucers, two teaspoons. Cups and spoons on saucers. Do it, you old fool, do it.

GERALD: He'll wake up. He'll come down. He'll find the mess. It'll be too late.

EILEEN: Cups... yes.... *[Ticks it off]* Saucers... yes.... *[Tick]* Spoons... *[Goes and gets them, puts them on saucers, ticks them off]* Milk jug.... *[Gets a jug out of the cupboard. It is absurdly large]* Milk in jug....

[She takes a pint of milk out of the fridge. Pours it all into the jug. Ticks it off]

GERALD: He'll see you've gone. There's only Pinetops. It's for the best, he'll say. He's got his own life to live.

EILEEN: Sugar. *[It's there]* Yes. Biscuits. I've always got biscuits. You do when you've been without. When you've had six around the kitchen table and it's Christmas Eve, and there's nothing on the table and there's nothing in the house and no coal on the fire though it's snowing out. Then there was a knock on the door - the Sally Army - with a chicken and a pudding in a cardboard hamper and a bag of coke and a toy each for all the children, used but no matter, and a pink ticket each for the pie shop on Boxing Day. There was an eel, pie and mash shop on the corner, cool tiles, white and bottle green, and all the kids from Pitfield Street lined up in their Christmas jerseys with their pink tickets in their hands. I told Gerald about that once, and he made me

promise -

GERALD: Don't you ever repeat that, do you hear? Ever.

EILEEN: After that, you've always got something in the larder. You make sure. Tin of soup. Beans. Just in case. She always kept the larder full.

GERALD: When she remembered.

EILEEN: They are here. I know. I had two lemon puffs yesterday, last of the packet, and the new one right by waiting to be opened. I'm sure it was yesterday.

GERALD: Or the day before. Or last week. Or the week before that.

EILEEN: They were chocolate digestives. Plain. I usually get milk, but this time I thought of Robert and I realised I didn't know. If he liked milk or plain. I don't know anything about him these days. And then I thought, no, he's an intellectual, he'll be Plain. *[She finds the biscuits]* See? Plain. But what if he is Milk? He always had a sweet tooth as a child, put sugar on his tomatoes on toast, seven years old he was, Gerald shouted at him for that too.

GERALD: You don't put sugar on vegetables.

EILEEN: Tomatoes are fruit, he said, and Gerald told him not to answer back, but he was right. I looked it up later in the Britannica, he was a little know-all even then, made Gerald even madder, sent him to bed without his tea.

GERALD: Got to be firm. Respect authority. They'll thank you for it in later life.

EILEEN: I sneaked him some malted milk and a ginger nut later. *[Pause]* What set her off on that?

GERALD: Biscuits.

[WOMAN sees biscuits, remembers, puts them on a plate. Looks at her work. A great relief. She can't believe she's done it. Checks the list.]

EILEEN: Cups, saucers, milk, teaspoons, sugar, biscuits. Will they want plates for their biscuits? They could get worried about crumbs in the bed. Think they've got to be on their best behaviour, mind their Ps and Qs. Put yourself in their place. If you were Robert's friend you'd be nervous. First time to stay, stay with his mother, almost like in-laws. Robert too, he'll be nervous. First time he's seen his mother in thirteen years, apart from the funeral. And that time I went to Birmingham -

GERALD: You went behind my back -

EILEEN: I had to.

GERALD: You cheated on me.

EILEEN: Only the once.

GERALD: Once is enough.

EILEEN: It was for your son.

GERALD: I have no son.

EILEEN: Calm down. You'll have another turn.

GERALD: I don't care if I have another turn. It'll be you. You bringing me to an early grave.

EILEEN: Don't say that.

GERALD: Like you did Claud.

EILEEN: Stop it. Stop it.

GERALD: There's no need to shout, Eileen.

EILEEN: Then tell me. Tell me what he's done, so you'd throw him out. Is he a murderer?

GERALD: I've told you. The subject is closed.

EILEEN: Dear Robert,

The garden is looking lovely, your father is under the weather, he's never properly recovered from the stroke really -

GERALD: I did not have a stroke. It was a dizzy spell.

EILEEN: - though you'd never know he'd had a stroke to look at him and he does pretty well for a man of his age. We came fourth at the Bridge Drive - not bad, though I say it myself. I thought you might be interested in this article in the Daily Telegraph so I cut it out for you.

GERALD: He won't get it. He's moved.

EILEEN: I do hope he hasn't moved.

GERALD: He wrote and told you. I tore it up.

EILEEN: He's bound to have left a forwarding address.

GERALD: I tore it up.

EILEEN: I still love you, Robert, whatever it is you've done, you're still my son.

GERALD: He thinks you hate him too.

EILEEN: We have done those things we ought not to have done and left undone those things we ought to have done, but thou, O Lord, art merciful. She'll have to put them at their ease. The day of atonement. Don't worry about the biscuit crumbs, she'll say. You're on holiday, relax, let me look after you. She'll say.

GERALD: Standing there in your curlers at the foot of the bed, and them stark naked in their sin and stained sheets, brazen -

EILEEN: Maybe they don't want biscuits. Maybe I should do a proper breakfast. Boiled eggs. Toast. Robert used to like soldiers. Dip them in his yolk. Never touch the white. Gerald didn't like that either.

GERALD: You're wasting half an egg.

EILEEN: He's got an allergy. There was an article in Woman's Realm. Some of them have allergies. It's the Sulphur makes them sick. Don't force the boy.

GERALD: Got to learn thrift. There's people starving in the world.

EILEEN: And much good half an old boiled egg will do them. Should I do eggs? Would they like eggs? I don't know what they like. Maybe they just want to be left alone.

GERALD: Alone in their shame.

EILEEN: I don't know any more. They don't want the old woman around. She knows nothing. What's she doing? Why did she come in here?

GERALD: Kettle.

[She feels the kettle]

EILEEN: Kettle's been boiling. I can tell.

GERALD: Tea.

EILEEN: Tea for Robert and - Robert's friend. What do I do when I go in? I'll knock, of course. Just like I used to.

EILEEN: Knock knock - who's there? - sounds like a joke -

ROBERT: *[Off]* What is it?

EILEEN: It's only me. I've brought you a cup of tea.

ROBERT: Hang on a minute.

EILEEN: What if they're - what if I'm interrupting? They'd say, wouldn't they?

GERALD: *[Mimicking Robert.]* "You can't come in, Mum, I'm sticking it up my bum chum." You look a fright.

EILEEN: They'd lock the door, wouldn't they? If the lock works. Has it got a key? I can't remember. Maybe they've locked it anyway. They wouldn't let me just barge in and - that would ruin everything.

GERALD: "We're not staying with her, sniffing round, poking and prying, dirty-minded old bat."

EILEEN: Don't say that.

GERALD: And good riddance to the both of them.

EILEEN: "Hang on." That's what Robert always used to say. Your tea's getting cold" - "Hang on". "You'll be late for school" - "Hang on". "There's going to be an earthquake" - "Hang on." And I'm hanging on, I'm hanging on Robert, I'm hanging on for dear life. Bed springs. Dressing gowns, put their bits away - what do they do, no, I don't want to know, none of my business, and me stood in the corridor with the tea getting cold.

ROBERT: Oh, mum, you shouldn't have.

EILEEN: Maybe I shouldn't.

GERALD: Tea cosy.

EILEEN: Tea cosy. Can't have it getting cold.

[She rummages in a drawer, gets a cosy out. Carefully puts it over the

teapot. Looks at it, counts again.]

Sugar, milk, biscuits, spoons, cups, slops bowl. No slops bowl. Got to have a slops bowl, what if they want a second cup, can't just put it in on top of your cold dregs. Must have a slops bowl.

[She rummages in the cupboard, finds it.]

GERALD: *[Sarcastic]* That'll impress them.

EILEEN: He must let me love him. Please God, let him let me love him. It's hard to take, is love. You get out of the habit of accepting it. He's not used to it from me. Not any more. Too many years' silence. Not my fault. He must know, forgive me Robert, forgive me Jesus. And he must love me. He must. He'll know when he sees the tea. Know I accept him as he is.

GERALD: Homosexual

EILEEN: As long as he's happy. That's all I want, for him to be happy. He looked happy. With - his friend.

GERALD: Declan.

EILEEN: *[Sees paper]* Declan. *[Pause]* What's Declan?

GERALD: An Irish sodomite.

EILEEN: They kept glancing at each other and smiling. Like it was all a secret joke.

GERALD: They were laughing at you.

EILEEN: I haven't seen Robert happy like that since he was tiny.

GERALD: See the old girl. She's a fright. She's a ruin.

EILEEN: Out in the garden. In the sun. In his high chair.

GERALD: Better stay in with her, though, she's got a bit put by, now the old sod's kicked the bucket.

EILEEN: Under the pear tree.

GERALD: He was always careful with his money, stingy old bastard, so it must be a good bit. And there's the house too. She's going to leave a few bob. Don't want her getting religion and giving it to some crackpot Mission. Maybe we can get her locked up in a home and get our hands on it early. Give it to our bum chums.

EILEEN: He loved being tickled. "I tought I taw a puddy tat a-tweeping up on me/ I did I taw a puddy tat as plain as plain could be."

[She tickles the imaginary baby Robert. It turns into the stroking gesture associated with cats.]

GERALD: There is no cat.

EILEEN: There was a cat in the coach station. When I met Robert. It had one eye, and mange, and it shivered as it brushed between my legs.

GERALD: Where's the Fairy Liquid? Squirt the Fairy Liquid at it.

EILEEN: Squirt him with the Fairy Liquid. Chase him down the garden path in his little rucksack. With your Fairy Liquid bottle.

GERALD: *[His voice is slurred.]* That's the phone.

EILEEN: I know it's the phone.

GERALD: I'll get it.

EILEEN: The doctor says you're not to go rushing about.

GERALD: I can't go rushing about.

EILEEN: So what you saying you'll go rushing about for?

GERALD: Answer the phone, woman.

EILEEN: Hello?

GERALD: Is it for me?

EILEEN: Elsie... How nice to hear from you.

GERALD: I'm just coming.

EILEEN: You stop right there, you'll do yourself a mischief. What was that, Elsie?

GERALD: Who is it?

EILEEN: Oh.....

GERALD: I said, who is it?

EILEEN: I can't talk long, Robert, your father's here.

GERALD: Answer me.

EILEEN: I'll have to go, your father's calling.

GERALD: I can't reach my stick.

EILEEN: You don't need your stick. All right, I'll be there somehow.

GERALD: Help me, Eileen.

EILEEN: I'm coming. Coach station, twelve thirty.

GERALD: I need to visit the bathroom.

EILEEN: I said I'm coming.

GERALD: Who was it?

EILEEN: Just a wrong number.

"I can't talk long, your father's here." I could have bitten my tongue, so ungrateful. It was the shock, I felt dizzy. I thought my heart would burst. And then I cheated.

GERALD: Where are you going?

EILEEN: I thought I'd see Elsie, she's been a bit under the weather.

GERALD: I'll come too.

EILEEN: No, dear, no point in both of us going.

GERALD: I could do with a breath of fresh air.

EILEEN: And how am I going to get you to Elsie's?

GERALD: We'll take a taxi.

EILEEN: And since when have you spent money on taxis?

GERALD: I never go out these days.

EILEEN: Honestly, dear, I don't want to impose on her. She's not up to visitors really, I'm just taking her a few things.

GERALD: You're up to something.

EILEEN: Don't be an old silly. She's got the flu. I don't want her giving it to you. That's the last thing I need on my hands.

GERALD: What about me?

EILEEN: You'll be all right. I'll be back to fix your supper.

GERALD: All alone in the house on my own.

EILEEN: It's only a few hours.

GERALD: I could drop dead any time. You wouldn't care.

EILEEN: You're not going to drop dead.

GERALD: How do you know?

EILEEN: I'll put the phone on your little table, just in case.

I was so scared he'd find out. I was convinced he'd ring Elsie, just to check. Elsie said not to worry, she'd cover if he called, say I'd gone to the shops for her. Gerald never told Elsie about Robert, never told anyone. He was too ashamed.

GERALD: None of your aunts will kiss you, son.

EILEEN: It was always something vague.

GERALD: He doesn't get much time to visit, he's got his own life to lead.

EILEEN: I s'pose Robert must have told her. Eventually. He always got on with Elsie, common as muck and a laugh like a horse. And afraid of nothing. Not like Eileen. All her life Eileen's been running scared of one bloody thing after another.

GERALD: Eileen, I warn you....

EILEEN: November, it was. I came by bus. Stupid really, it'd have been much quicker by train, but he said the coach station, and anyway the train would have been more out of the housekeeping and more to explain, I could hide £5.50. It was raining. We went to a cafe. I was crying. I couldn't stop it, and I couldn't speak for the tears.

GERALD: You were always crying.

EILEEN: She cries easily. She can't help it. She cried at Gardeners' Question Time once. They had a question about lupins, and Robert used to grow lupins out the front when he was little. It was the only thing he ever grew. She felt such a fool.

GERALD: What are you crying for?

EILEEN: *[In tears]* Lupins. See? She's at it again, just the thought of it. Take no notice of her. Old people get weepy, it's their glands, they can't control it, doesn't mean anything. *[Pause]*

Ten to eight. Is it too early? Old people get up early, sometimes it doesn't seem worth the bother of going to bed. And it's a lovely day, going to be. You don't want to miss it. They can go up on the common, maybe up to the ponds and feed the ducks. They'll thank me for it, I know they will.

GERALD: They won't. They'll think you're off your chump.

EILEEN: Yes, it's time. Pot should have settled. Don't want it stewed, do we? Oh no, our boys wouldn't want it stewed.

[She feels the pot. It is cold - no water.]

I don't understand. How long have I - ? It can't have gone -

GERALD: No water.

[She lifts the pot. It is light.]

EILEEN: My name is Eileen May Parker. I am 68 years old. I live at 19, The Glebe, Purley. Today is Friday, 28th August 1992, the name of the Prime Minister is John Major. My Co-op number is E757431.

[She feels the kettle. Puts it on again.]

I will not let this happen to me.

GERALD: That's what Canute said.

EILEEN: I will not.

GERALD: The tide crept up. It washed his feet. Get back, he said, and it crept to his knees.

EILEEN: She knows and she will not let the blackness come.

GERALD: The water was cold, it washed round his waist....

EILEEN: She can keep it out, if she'll only concentrate.

GERALD: His chest...

EILEEN: It's a matter of will-power.

GERALD: His neck. Lapping round his ears. Retreat or drown.

EILEEN: Robert will understand. I'll take him his tea, and after, when he's come down, after breakfast maybe, we'll sit down and have a talk.

GERALD: Except there's no retreat. You can only drown.

EILEEN: Help me, Robert, she'll say. Help your mother.

GERALD: And he won't.

[She is finding it increasingly difficult not to speak directly to him]

EILEEN: You were a painful birth, she'll say. Thirty hours labour. She'll tell him all about it. She's never told him. He asked her once what time he was born because he wanted to have his astrological chart done, he was going mystical at the time, well, they all were, and she almost told him then, but she didn't, she just said half past three in the morning, I think it was, but she didn't

tell the rest.

I was thirty-three, I was getting on, I'll say. I wanted you sooner, but Gerald wouldn't let me.

GERALD: First things first. Get a home of our own. Wait till I'm promoted.

EILEEN: He was a good husband. At first. Considerate in his lovemaking. But he never wanted a child. He'd buy a packet of three from the barbers, funny, these days they even have them on the telly, but then it was under the counter. I used to pray that one day they'd break, but they never did. I even put a pin through one but he spotted it. Even took it back to complain. After that he was always - careful.

EILEEN: I was aching for you. And then when you came I thought you'd tear me apart. They wanted a caesarian, but I said no, I want to do this all by myself, but then the pain was too much and they gave me gas, so I don't remember some of it. And then there you were. I didn't see you till you were cleaned up. They scraped the bits of me off you, and you were pink and purple in the face and so, so beautiful. Like something from another planet. You'd been part of me and now you weren't, like all the carrying and all the backache and hope and pain weren't connected to this tiny, tiny creature in my arms. They'd happened to someone else. It was as if, as if, there really was a stork and he'd flown over and brought you in a bundle, just like the pictures in the children's books. Can you understand that, Robert?

GERALD: You've been brooding too much.

EILEEN: You didn't ask to be born. It was me wanted you, me brought you into the world. I'll always feel responsible. You're part of me, and yet I don't know who you are.

GERALD: Cuckoo. Cuckoo in the nest.

EILEEN: I know I could have done more. I should have done more. I should have stood up for you. Against your father.

GERALD: Suck your blood and fly away.

EILEEN: I tried. But he was stronger than me.

GERALD: You stay out of this, Eileen, or you'll regret it.

EILEEN: And I was frightened of him. When you live with someone who's stronger all that time, forty five years nearly, you get used to being weak. It becomes a habit. You give up. You let it happen. I thought about a divorce - who doesn't? - but by then it was too late. I'd lost the will. I was too scared. I didn't think I could manage.

GERALD: You couldn't. You can't.

EILEEN: And I can't manage. I need you, Robert. Help me. Help your mother. You owe me that much.

[She is staring at the kettle. It has boiled again. She reaches to it and touches it, wondering what it is. It scalds her. She comes out of her reverie.]

GERALD: Not safe. Do herself a mischief.

[She takes the kettle determinedly, goes to tea tray. She hovers over it, uncertain where to pour it.]

EILEEN: What's it for?

GERALD: Tea -

EILEEN: Tea?

GERALD: *[Derisive]* See?

EILEEN: We had tea. In the cafe by the bus station. A pot of

tea for two, but it was only one teabag, mean I call it, the second cup was just a dribble too. And you told me. Gerald said not to tell me because it would kill me if you told me. But you told me. And it didn't, did it? She's a tough old bird, see? She's still here. And she understands. She wants you to be happy.

[Enter ROBERT, with a teacup in hand; other hand on EILEEN's shoulder]

ROBERT: Don't cry, Mum.

EILEEN: She can't help it.

ROBERT: Please. It's not your fault. It's his fault.

EILEEN: It's not his fault, he can't help it. He's a sick man.

ROBERT: I don't know how you stand it.

EILEEN: Oh, it's not as bad as that. You get used to it.

ROBERT: You shouldn't have to "get used to it".

EILEEN: Someone's got to look after him.

ROBERT: He's wearing you down. He'll kill you.

EILEEN: Don't be so daft. It's not that bad.

ROBERT: He ought to be in a home.

EILEEN: How can you say that? About your own father?

ROBERT: He's not my father.

EILEEN: Of course he's your father. You can't change that.

ROBERT: You always made excuses for him.

EILEEN: He's getting worse. You wouldn't recognise him. Sometimes he -

ROBERT: What?

EILEEN: Oh it's nothing -

ROBERT: You look so worn out.

EILEEN: I am worn out, and that's a fact. He's very - demanding. Sometimes he - I know he doesn't mean it really - but his stick - he waves it at me - and he doesn't see straight - it doesn't hurt - he hasn't got the strength these days - but -

ROBERT: Leave him.

EILEEN: He's my husband. You wouldn't understand, you being that way, it wouldn't mean anything to you. But I promised, see? Sickness and health, richer and poorer. It was real. I can't just - it tears me apart and it's not my fault, and I don't know what to do and if I thought it could make you love each other I'd slit my throat on the spot and gladly, but it wouldn't because you can't and he can't, you never have and all I know is there with him, -

ROBERT: You're siding with him.

EILEEN: I'm not siding with anybody. I want to see you, I want to help you, Robert, but my place is with him.

ROBERT: I hate him.

EILEEN: Don't say that.

ROBERT: It's true. I'll never forgive him.

[Pause]

EILEEN: Neither will I.

ROBERT: Then leave him. Come to Birmingham. We can find

you a flat. There's a women's refuge, they'll help you.

EILEEN: How? How will they help me? What can they do?

ROBERT: They can give you support.

EILEEN: I don't need support.

ROBERT: Mum, you are a victim of domestic violence.

EILEEN: Don't use words like that to me.

ROBERT: He beats you, doesn't he?

EILEEN: Don't you talk about your father like that.

ROBERT: He's not my father.

EILEEN: Well, he's my husband.

ROBERT: See? You *are* on his side.

EILEEN: I'm not.

ROBERT: Then leave him. Get a divorce.

EILEEN: I can't just get a divorce, like getting a new pair of slippers.

ROBERT: You could start a new life.

EILEEN: I'm over sixty. What kind of a life would it be at my age?

ROBERT: Your own life.

EILEEN: I wouldn't know what to do with it. And what am I meant to live on? Thin air?

ROBERT: You've got your pension.

EILEEN: And a long way that would go, on my own.

ROBERT: I'd help out.

EILEEN: I don't want your charity.

ROBERT: It wouldn't be charity. I want to help.

EILEEN: It wouldn't be right.

ROBERT: He'll have to support you anyway. It's called maintenance. You'll get half his property.

EILEEN: I couldn't do that to him. He's an old man, he's worked hard all his life.

ROBERT: Mum, it's eating you alive.

EILEEN: Of course it is, I know that, I'm not daft. But what else is there? I can't start again, not at my time of life, and I don't want to, to be honest, for all his faults - I remember, see, when he wasn't like this, he was young, he was funny and we went to Clacton and he told me he loved me, under the pier, in the blackout, and the waves whispered on the beach and the moon shone. All this was after.

ROBERT: Mum, I can't live on your memories.

EILEEN: And sometimes still for no reason at all he'll just look at me and smile, when he's in a good mood, and I can see him on the beach, just in outline, and I remember him so handsome in his uniform and I can still love him for what he was. I don't expect you to understand that, you're too young to understand -

ROBERT: I don't. All I know is what I see, and I see you're on his side. There's nothing more to say. Bye, Mum.

[He almost slams the cup down and leaves abruptly.]

EILEEN: He didn't even kiss her. Left the coach station like he'd left the house. Never looked back. He thought she was on Gerald's side, but she wasn't, she wasn't on anyone's side, she just wanted everyone to be happy and leave her alone, what's so wrong with that?

GERALD: You can't have it all ways. You've got to choose.

EILEEN: *[Reacting directly for the first time]* Why? Only because you made it so.

GERALD: Him or me. You have to choose.

EILEEN: Why should I? Why should I? You're my husband, he's my son.

GERALD: I have no son.

EILEEN: My son.

GERALD: Where's the Fairy Liquid?

EILEEN: You're his father.

ROBERT: *[Off]* I have no father.

EILEEN: You're tearing me in two.

GERALD: If you don't choose, you'll go mad.

EILEEN: I will not go mad.

GERALD: Then choose. I'm your husband. I have a right.

EILEEN: I have a son.

GERALD: Had, had. He died. As much as Claud did. He went away. And that was an end of it.

EILEEN: No, no.

GERALD: We've been happy, haven't we? After a fashion. What more can you expect? We did our best.

EILEEN: Not good enough.

GERALD: Forget him. He can't save you.

EILEEN: He's got a name. His name's Robert. And he's back.

GERALD: That's what you think.

EILEEN: He won't leave me. He won't let me drown.

GERALD: Know why he's here? Curiosity. And sizing you up. Seeing how long you've got before he gets the house. He'll be looking in Estate Agents this afternoon, seeing what houses fetch round here. Working it all out. He doesn't feel anything. How could he? You let him down, like you let Claud down. You had the chance. In the cafe by the bus station. And you came back, because you knew you had to. You can't escape. You can't win. And you don't want to.

[During the following speech the lights slowly narrow so that they are only focused on EILEEN's face.]

EILEEN: You shut up, you. You got diabetes, you don't count. The diabetes poisoned you, and you poisoned everything else. Chemicals, in the brain. That's all the brain is, chemicals, cells changing. The sugars got to your brain. Tempers, tantrums, days of silences, days of shouting, you hit me, oh yes, you did, don't deny it, right across the bridge table, three tricks off from Four Hearts and you shouted You Stupid Bitch and slap, and Mr. and Mrs. Walters first time at the club, I don't know what they must have thought. That was the first. You were sick and I knew you were sick but I didn't know what it was and I kept saying, see the doctor; but would you? No, and then when you had the stroke, then they said it'd been building up for some time, happens when you get to a certain age, it was all the diabetes talking,

and I tried to tell Robert it was just that, nothing more than stupid, stupid diabetes, and you didn't really mean it; come back, Robert, it'll change, everything'll be all right, you'll see, but I couldn't because by then I didn't even know where he was, and then you had another and then the third and then when I saw him in the bus station it was all too late, until there he was at the funeral, and I knew it had to happen now. But you're still here and you won't let go; but you will, you've got to because he's the only hope, see? You took away everything else, made me something else, something I wasn't, made me ashamed of what I was, OK we was poor and we was common, but we had heart and we cared, and Claud danced so lovely and I was right, he did look good in blue, but he went, and the others moved, people do, things change, people die. Elsie, Bob both gone, Ted I don't know where he's got to, even if he's still alive, Meg in Canada, Claud's bones somewhere in the desert; you took me away, I couldn't go back even if they was here, but they ain't, so what's the point in fretting over it, but Robert is here, he's here in our bed with - DECLAN - his LOVER and what's so wrong with that? - there's not so much love in this world we can pick and choose. And all I want is for him to know, and there are no words to make up, just a pot of tea, he'll understand you don't need words sometimes. But you, you stuck up git, won't even let me make a pot of fucking tea, but I can, see, so don't you come the raw prawn with me, you don't know nothing. She's not so gone she can't make a pot of tea. Tea in pot, water on tea, see, and stir, right, and lid on and cosy over, easy when it's got to be done, because you're no use to me Gerald not now, Robert is, Robert loves his mum, he'll look after her like he promised, and there comes a time when you've just got to throw out the junk, and you're junk now, Gerald, good or bad whatever and there was both, I know, but you're no fucking use, you're dead and that's all there is to it, so you've got to go O-U-T. Out.

[She turns and goes to the armchair. She tears down the Daily

Telegraph. The lights return to full. Behind it there is nothing but an old but well-pressed suit laid out. The Radio is playing the "Today" programme in the background. She takes the suit, wraps it slowly and carefully in brown paper and string, as she does so, she sings to herself:]

EILEEN: Lulla lulla lulla Lullaby
Baby's going to sleep
Hush now baby don't you cry
Mummy's got her watch to keep.
Lulla lulla lulla Lullaby
Baby close your eyes
Catch the boat to dreamland
Listen to your Mummy's lullabies.

Lulla lulla lulla lullaby
Soon you'll fly away
Birdie's going to leave the nest
Come the break of day.
Lulla lulla lulla lullaby
Everything must grow
Never fear tomorrow
When the time is ready, you must go.

[She has finished wrapping the suit. She labels the parcel Jumble, and puts it carefully to one side.]

EILEEN: Something for the Scouts.

[She takes a last look at the tea-tray, checks that everything is in place. She realises that the milk jug is far too large, finds another, pours half the milk into it, puts the rest in the fridge. One last check. Pats her hair, picks up the tray, and exits.]

Epilogue: One year later

[A small pool of light. ROBERT and his mother; she has her arms wrapped round him, and is holding him very close. She stares at him in adoration, but does not take in what he says. ROBERT is wearing the same suit that GERALS wore.]

ROBERT: *[Laughing, embarrassed]* Now come on, mum, let me go. I can't stay for ever. Declan's waiting, I've got to go. I've got a lot of marking to do, I must get home.

EILEEN: Don't do that, Claud, you'll make me fall in the copper. No, don't push me I'll fall.

ROBERT: Listen to me, Mum. Now, I think I've brought everything you need, but I'll check with the nurses, and if I think of anything else I'll bring it next time.

EILEEN: I've burnt the beans.

ROBERT: What?

EILEEN: I've left the beans on. I've burnt the beans.

ROBERT: Don't be silly, there aren't any beans. I checked the gas. And the electric. I'll be down to see you in a fortnight, OK? It's a lovely view you've got here. Look, you can see right over the lake. The rhododendrons are gorgeous, aren't they? And look, there's the ducks swimming. Can you see the little duckies, mm?

EILEEN: I can't see the bus.

ROBERT: You don't need a bus.

EILEEN: I'll be late for Robert if I miss the bus.

ROBERT: This is Robert. I'm here, mum.

EILEEN: You get half price with your pension book.

ROBERT: Listen, Mum. Are you listening? I want you to be happy here. The staff are very kind, they'll take good care of you, I know they will.. You'll be able to go for lovely long walks in the grounds when the weather's good.

EILEEN: Where's the kazi? I can't see the kazi.

ROBERT: You won't need to go out to the toilet. It's here. Right here in your room.

EILEEN: Got to go to the kazi for a big job.

ROBERT: That too. Right here. And there - see? - you've got a television all of your own right here in your room. And guess what they've got for you this evening? A magic show! Yes! You'll like that, won't you?

[A bell rings.]

EILEEN: Hello? Hello? I can't talk now, your father's here.

ROBERT: No, mum, please. Listen, that's the tea bell, you've got to go down or you'll miss your tea, and we can't have that, can we?

EILEEN: Where's my ticket?

ROBERT: Your bus ticket?

EILEEN: My pie ticket. You don't get pie without your pink ticket.

ROBERT: You won't need a ticket; you'll get three meals a day, and tea and biscuits. It was in the brochure. I showed you. All right. We'll go down together. Come on, then. And you can say hello to all the other residents too.

EILEEN: Where's the Fairy Liquid? Chase them with the Fairy Liquid.

ROBERT: You don't want Fairy Liquid with your tea.

EILEEN: They'll be all over the roses.

ROBERT: Come on, Mum. Come and get your tea.

EILEEN: When's Claud coming?

ROBERT: When he can. No, don't cry, Mum. Please don't cry. I
t's for the best, honestly it is. Honestly. Look, I
can't have you at home, even if I wanted. I mean, I do
want, but - Who'd look after you? We can't afford a
nurse. Declan's at work, I'm at the school all day.

EILEEN: Puppy wakes up. He stretches himself, he shakes
himself.

[She laughs and claps her hands.]

ROBERT: He gets out of his basket. He wags his tail. I
remember, see?

[The WOMAN holds his hand, trustingly.]

I've got no choice. It wouldn't be safe. It wouldn't be safe for
you.

[She stares accusingly at him. He tries to move away, but she holds him.]

I'll be down next weekend, I promise. I'll be down every
weekend. And you'll be well looked after, you'll make lots of
friends. It's for the best, Mum, believe me. What else can we
do?

*[He looks at her helplessly. Pecks her on the cheek, and exits awkwardly.
She reaches down and puts her hand out.]*

EILEEN: Puss. Puss, puss....

[She cradles an imaginary cat in her arms, stroking it. She stares ahead.]

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[The lights fade.]

THE END