

**"MY BROTHER'S KEEPER"**

© Tony Breeze  
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70 Nottingham Road  
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- (i) Name and address of applicant
- (ii) Name and address of society
- (iii) Name and address of theatre or hall where the performances would be held
- (iv) Times and dates of performances

A fee will be charged for this licence which must be paid prior to the first performance otherwise the licence is automatically cancelled and the performance becomes illegal

## CHARACTERS

- Bill    Teacher in secondary school, middle class, set in ways but was musically very creative when younger
- Sue    His wife who is a primary teacher with pretensions of grandeur who likes everything to be just so and cannot stand the sight of Alan.
- Alan   Middle-aged, renegade writer and brother of Bill, who left home and is the more emotional and non-conformist of the two. He doesn't get on with Sue.
- Andrea   Alan's latest girlfriend, an actress, young enough to be his daughter
- Dad    The bedridden father of Bill and Alan aged about seventy (non-speaking)
- David   Alan's seventeen-year-old son from his first marriage (non-speaking and appearing only briefly at the end)
- NB    The characters in this play are entirely fictitious and are not based on any person either living or dead

(Introductory music [anything on the theme of brothers] the scene is an old person's house which bears all the marks of a bygone era. There is an upright piano [which has to be played later] and hung around are paintings by the bedridden father who was a talented amateur artist in his youth. Some of the paintings are of birds either perched or in flight, others of the local area, Bill, the middle-aged son, doesn't normally sleep there but has returned to look after his dad. Bill is asleep in an armchair with the television emitting a closedown signal in the early hours of the morning while the father is in bed in the next room attached to a drip feed. The room needs to have a window that opens or a patio door. The doorbell rings. It doesn't wake Bill. It rings again more impatiently and he slowly stirs from his sleep, hears the bell and switches off the TV to go and answer the door)

Bill What time do you call this?

Alan (Comes in carrying a shoulder bag - he is of a similar age to Bill but is more unkempt and is dressed in modern casual clothing)

I'm sorry, the train was late. How is he?

Bill Much the same. You got the message then?

Alan Yes. Why didn't you contact me sooner?

Bill Have you ever tried contacting somebody on a walking holiday in France?

Alan It wasn't a holiday and well you know it

Bill All right then, research, call it what you want – you were still damned hard to find.

Alan I left clear instructions with my agent

Bill Its a big country Alan

Alan Where is he?

Bill (Taking him to an adjoining ground floor room) Through here

(Switching on the light)

I moved his bed down here when they brought him back from the hospital

(Alan approaches the old man in the bed in a concerned manner)

Alan Dad?

(No response from the sleeping figure)

Bill You're wasting your time

Alan Is he asleep?

Bill You could call it that.

Alan Has he said anything?

Bill No - he just lies there

Alan I wish you'd reached me sooner

Bill It wasn't for the want of trying

Alan What about the doctor?

Bill He's had doctors, nurses, you name it. They had him in hospital for a while and were going to keep him in but changed their minds - there isn't the room apparently and the doctor said there isn't much they can do for him there that we cant do here

Alan So who's looking after him?

Bill Who do you think? He did have the health visitor and the meals on wheels but since he was taken ill Sue and I moved in and took some time off school to look after him

Alan What about your two kids?

Bill They've gone to stay with her sister

Alan And how long has he been like this?

Bill Almost a month

Alan I should have been here

Bill There wouldn't have been anything you could have done

Alan I know but ...(Turning away) I need a drink

Bill I'll put the kettle on

(They go back into the living room and Bill goes to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Alan rummages through his bag and produces a bottle of scotch)

Alan (To Bill as he returns) I meant a "drink" drink

Bill You're not still on that stuff?

Alan If you can find a glass you can join me

Bill No thanks – you know where they are

(Alan gets himself a glass and one for Bill in case then sits on the sofa and pours himself a stiff whiskey)

Alan What did the doctor say?

Bill She thinks its another stroke

Alan Have they said - you know...?

Bill No, but they don' t give him much of a chance

Alan That's what they said the last time

Bill Its not the same, Alan, since you last saw him he's been going down hill rapidly - his mind was going - he was saying the strangest of things. I know it sounds cruel but after what we've been through one half of me is hoping ... well ... you know

Alan I didn't know it was that bad

Bill I didn't want to bother you

Alan You're making me feel extremely guilty

Bill There's no need, we managed

Alan How are things otherwise?

Bill Much the same

Alan Still at the same school?

Bill 'Fraid so - nothing changes

Alan And Sue?

Bill She's moved on since you saw her last - got a promotion - do

you want me to tell her you've arrived?

Alan No, don' t bother

Bill She was going to wait up but it got so late and she was tired - so I said I'd hold the fort

Alan Reliable to the last

Bill (With hidden meaning) Somebody's got to be

Alan (Pouring himself another glass) Are you sure you wont join me?

Bill No thanks; the kettle should be boiling by now

(He goes to make the tea. While he's gone Alan goes and stands at the open door to his father's room. Bill comes back a few moments later with a tea tray)

Bill (Indicating whiskey) I'd have thought you'd have given that stuff up by now

Alan I do do - every morning - then at night I need the crutch to help me through

Bill God knows what your liver must be like

Alan I'm thinking of leaving it to medical science - my liver to Alcoholics Anonymous, my brain to the Writers' Guild and my balls to Save the Children Fund

Bill Same old you

Alan Yes, same old me – one of us has to have a sense of humour

Bill Is that what you call it?

Alan You know something - you're my worst critic. Trying to make you laugh's like standing in front of an audience at a workman's club at Kingston-on-Hull on a wet Monday night

Bill Somebody must like your work - I caught the last one on the box

Alan Did you really? What was it like?

Bill What do you mean "What was it like?" Didn't you watch it?

Alan No, I don't watch them - its bad enough writing them without having to suffer the pain twice over

Bill You amaze me sometimes

Alan Just as long as they keep sending me the cheque, that's all that matters

Bill I didn't think the girl who played the teacher was very convincing

Alan Well you should know - you'll be able to tell her that when you see her tomorrow

Bill She's coming here?

Alan All being well - she had to go to an audition

Bill Is she the one who's been going round France with you?

Alan That's what I like about you little brother, you catch on so fast

Bill But she's no more than a child

Alan She just happens to like older men

Bill I can't keep up with you

Alan No but she can - that's all that matters

Bill You change your women quicker than I change shirts

Alan You never were very hygienic though, were you?

Bill Why don't you just stick to one and put some roots down?

Alan And end up like you? No thanks - I've seen what it can do to a man - I was there once, remember?

Bill Do you ever see the ex?

Alan Only when I get behind with the maintenance or she's after something. (Offering him a drink) Are you sure you wont join me?

Bill 'd better not

Alan Get thee behind me Satan

Bill How are things with you?

Alan Great - I've got a play coming off up north, a few writers' courses and a trip to Australia in the offing



Bill Not quite on the bread line then yet

Alan Not quite - though you know what they say you' re only as good as your last review ... How about you? Do you still do a bit on the old Joanna?

Bill I get the occasional booking f or dances and village hall pantomimes - nothing quite as exotic as trips to Australia

Alan Its not all excitement, believe me, once you've seen one hotel room you've seen them all - I have to admit there have been times when I've almost envied you

Bill Come off it

Alan Its true - the jet setting isn't all its cut out to be

Bill I wouldn't' t mind giving it a try ... the most excitement I get these days is the weekly shopping trip to Tesco's ... by the time I get home from school, put the kettle on and do a bit of marking its time to organise the tea ... Sue gets in after me and she likes me to do my bit ... a sharing relationship she calls it ... (Due to the long journey and the whiskey Alan has begun to drop off to sleep) ... then the kids get home and all hell generally breaks lose ... they're always arguing with each other but then again I suppose you and I were like that, weren't we ? – Always at each other's throats - I said - Alan? (sees he's dropped off) Well I was going to show you where your bed was but it doesn't look like you need one - I suppose you'll be OK there (he gets a blanket and covers his sleeping brother, removing the whiskey glass from his hand)

(As he switches the light off)

Sweet dreams brother - see you in the morning

(The light goes out in the living room leaving a shaft of moonlight illuminating the sick father in bed next door - then this slowly fades with a gradual black out)

(Birdsong as the lights of the next day come up - Alan has changed his position and is now curled up on the sofa. Sue doesn't see him but comes in and goes straight to the old man's room where she opens the curtains and checks he's still in the land of the living [perhaps not for the best of motives]. She straightens the bed then goes into the living room to open the curtains. As she does so she turns and sees the body of Alan on the sofa which gives her a shock)

Sue Oh?!

Alan (Waking with a start) Eh?

Sue It's you (There is no love lost between these two)  
You've arrived have you?

Alan (Blearily) Good God, what time is it?

Sue Eight o'clock - time you were up

Alan (Pulling the blanket over his head) Its still the middle of the night woman

Sue It might be to you - some of us keep different hours

Alan Wake me when it strikes twelve

Sue (Seeing the whiskey bottle) I see you've changed none of your old habits  
  
(She switches on the radio which belches out inane music)

Alan Do you have to?

Sue (Turning it off) Are you getting up or do we have to work round you?

Alan All right, all right, I know when I'm beaten  
  
(He pulls himself up and rubs his eyes then goes to look into his father's room before coming back to Sue)  
  
I presume the bathroom's still in the same place  
  
(Alan goes off and shortly afterwards Bill comes in wearing his dressing gown and goes to check his Dad)

Sue You didn't tell me the prodigal had returned

Bill I didn't want to wake you

Sue (Indicating bottle and two glasses) Nothing appears to have changed

Bill I never touched a drop - honest  
  
(Sue looks unconvinced)

Sue (Laying the breakfast table) What time did he get here?

Bill It was late

Sue How late?

Bill About one o'clock

Sue Typical

Bill Now don't start, he's come a long way

Sue Why can't he travel at normal times like everyone else?

Bill The plane was late or something

Sue I'm surprised he's shown at all with his busy schedule

Bill He says he's got a trip lined up to Australia

Sue While he's there he ought to stay

Bill Look - I don't want you two at each others throats - just for a change call a truce or something

Sue It isn't me that starts it

Bill All right but try to be nice to him just this once

Sue I'll try but I'm not making any promises

Bill Whenever you get together I feel like a referee at a boxing match

Sue At least I don't hit below the belt. Are you having some breakfast?

Bill Why not

Sue I just wondered if you felt up to it

Bill I've told you, I didn't have a drink

Sue I believe you ...(implying "thousands wouldn't")

(She goes off to the kitchen and comes back with bread for the toaster. They sit at the breakfast table)

Bill He says his latest girlfriend's coming later on

Sue What? Here?

Bill Yes. Do you remember the young one that played the teacher in the series? She's been travelling round France with him

Sue But she's ...

Bill Young enough to be his daughter - that's what I said - I don't know how he does it

Sue Its not very thoughtful inviting her here at a time like this

Bill You know Alan, eat drink and be merry ... (realising what he's said he casts a glance towards the sick room) Have you got any plans for today?

Sue I've got a hair appointment at nine and then I need to do some shopping. I might call in at school later just to see how things are going with the supply

Bill You're itching to get back to work aren't you?

Sue Not 'itching' but you know what they're like when they don't have the regular teacher

Bill You can go back, you know, if you like, I can manage

Sue I couldn't - there's the cooking and cleaning and all the washing to do

Bill That's all right, now Alan's here he can give me a dig out

Sue Do you really think you could manage?

Bill Of course... we don't know how long dad's going to be like this do we?

Sue That's true, when you think how long it was the last time

Bill I think you ought to go, it'll take your mind off things and I can always ring you if ... well you know

Sue I've done as much as I can upstairs

Bill The place has never been so clean

Sue All right then, if you really think its OK

Bill I do

Sue I'll call and see Malcolm at lunchtime and see what he says

Alan (Coming back from the loo) And how's my favourite sister-in-law?

Sue (Falsely) All the better for seeing you

Alan I'm sure. This is a bit unusual for you isn't it - doing the Florence Nightingale bit?

Sue Well you should know - being such a regular visitor

Alan Have you come to clean the family silver then or to count it?

Sue Well really!

Bill There's no need for that, Alan, Sue's been a great help

Alan I'll bet she has

Bill We were actually just saying we think she should be going back to school now that you've arrived

Alan I know she can't stand the sight of me but isn't that a bit obvious?

Bill Only we don't know how long Dad's going to be in his present state and it's a very busy time of the year for her

Alan I know ... wouldn't you think the old fellow would have chosen a better time to have his heart attack? Most inconsiderate of him

Sue I don't have to sit here and be insulted

Alan Why? Do you know of a better place?

Sue (Getting up) (To Bill) I'm going. I'll give you a ring later on  
(She gives him a goodbye peck on the cheek)

Alan Don't I get one as well?  
  
(She gives him a withering look and flounces out turning her head away)

Bill Why is it that when you two get together there's always this nasty chemical reaction?

Alan She secretly loves me, deep down beneath that veneer of naked hatred

Bill I dread the two of you coming together

Alan I think it's because she reminds me so much of my ex missus

Bill It's no wonder you split up

Alan She reminds me of everything I gave up - the semi-detached

in suburbia, the neatly trimmed hedges and lawns, the slippers by the fire, the invisible chains of domesticity

Bill And where does that put me?

Alan If the cap fits old son ... (going to the sick room door)  
How's the old man today?

Bill I can't see any marked difference

Alan Can I try getting through to him?

Bill You can, but I don't think it'll do any good

Alan (Approaches the bed with Bill behind him) Dad? Dad, its Alan...

(No response)

Bill He's come to see you Dad, all the way from France

Alan What've you been up to you old bugger? Can you hear me?  
Another fine mess you've got yourself into

Bill Its pointless Alan

Alan (Undeterred) You never know (To Dad) What time do you call this then? Staying in bed till this hour - and you're the one that was always up with the lark. Mum wouldn't have let you do this now would she? She'd have been chasing you round like nobody's business ... do you hear?

Bill You're wasting your time

Alan I thought I saw a reaction

Bill No ... I've tried, I've tried all kinds of things, believe me

Alan What about his music? That might work - have you tried that?

Bill No, but –

Alan Come on then, what are we waiting for?

(He goes back into the living room to an old music centre and puts on some music)

Alan This should do, he loved this - it reminded him of Mum he always said

(An old romantic song is played)

Bill Not too loud

Alan Its got to be loud for him to hear it

(They go back to the bedside)

Alan Any sign?

Bill Not a flicker

Alan Dad? They're playing your song - remember? (He joins in with the song) You told me they were playing this when you met Mum at that dance - (sings a little again) - the night you walked her home

Bill Its useless Alan

Alan You've got to try - perhaps it's not loud enough

Bill It won't go much louder - think about the neighbours?

Alan Bugger the neighbours, this is my father we're talking about

(He goes to turn it up and for a short while they both watch for a reaction - there is none and Bill goes back to the player and turns it off)

Alan What' re you doing?

Bill Its not doing any good

Alan You don' t know, you hear about these things, people brought out of comas with recordings of their favourite pop stars

Bill This is different, Alan

Alan Or smells - perhaps if we could get through to him in another way - I know - we could try his pipe

Bill Alan – no!

(He goes back into the living room and finds his dad' s pipe, lights it and comes back to sit near the bed puffing the smoke around the room)

Bill This is ridiculous

Alan Just a minute, give it just a minute

Bill The doctor said he should have peace and quiet

Alan     What do they know?

Bill     (Taking the pipe from his hand) They know more than we do  
  
(He takes it into the living room and Alan follows)

Alan     Can you think of a better idea then?

(Bill doesn't respond)

You cant can you?

Bill     Look, the doctor's coming this morning. I'll have another word with her

Alan     It's not their problem - to them its just another old bloke on his way out

Bill     They're the experts

Alan     But they' re not involved like we are - if it was their dad they'd be pulling all the stops out, they'd have him in hospital for a start

Bill     When the doctor comes we can ask her

Alan     (Getting up in a temper) You ask her

Bill     Why? Where are you going?

Alan     I don' t know - yes I do - I'm going for a walk ... a walk with Dad

Bill     I don't understand

Alan     No, I don't expect you to

(As he goes out the lights fade to show time passing. They come up again as Bill is going round with the cleaner. The doorbell rings he doesn't hear it - it rings again and he switches off the cleaner and goes to answer it. Bill and Andrea come in)

Bill     I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else

Andrea   I can be if you like - who would you like me to be?

Bill     No, what I mean is I was expecting the doctor - you must be Alan's friend



Andrea (Holding out a hand) Andrea, pleased to meet you

Bill (Shaking it) Bill

Andrea The brother

Bill That's right

Andrea How is your dad?

Bill Not very well

Andrea ((Indicating door) If it's not convenient ...

Bill That's OK – you're here now

Andrea Alan insisted

Bill It's OK – really

Andrea As soon as we got your message we came straight back

Bill So he said ... How did the audition go?

Andrea He told you did he? I don't know - they said they'd be in touch but they always say that

Bill It seems strange seeing you in the flesh

Andrea You saw it did you, on the box? What did you think?

Bill (Hesitant over telling the truth) It's hard for me to say - I'm teaching you see - English - and so is the wife - she's doing primary

Andrea Oh well, all the better - did you like what you saw?

Bill Well ...

Andrea You don't have to pull any punches

Bill To tell you the truth...

Andrea You didn't, did you? I can tell by your face

Bill It's very hard for somebody on the outside to know what it's really like

Andrea I told them it was nothing like reality but that's what the director wanted and that's what he got

Bill Can I make you a drink or something?

Andrea That would be great - I'm parched - tea please - I prefer it weak with a slice of lemon but just black and weak will do

Bill No problem - make yourself at home

(He goes off to put the kettle on - she takes a look through the open door of the sick room then feels guilty for having invaded the old man's privacy)

Bill (Returning) No lemon I'm afraid

Andrea That's OK - Is Alan in?

Bill No, he's out at the moment - he said something very strange before he went - he said "I'm just going out for a walk with Dad"

Andrea He's a bit odd isn't he? Very deep

Bill Is that what you call it

Andrea I feel rather odd myself coming here at a time like this - a bit like an interloper

Bill You're very welcome

Andrea I really didn't want to come but you what Alan's like, how emotional he can get. I suppose I thought he might need some support

Bill You sound as if you know him very well

Andrea As well as anybody - but I always feel I never quite get to know the real Alan underneath

(Sounds of someone coming in)

Bill This might be him now

(Sue comes in with her shopping bags, somewhat tentatively, expecting Alan still to be there)

Bill Oh, it's you

Sue Who did you think it would be?

Bill I'm sorry, I thought it was Alan, he's gone out for a walk - Sue, (To Andrea) my wife, (To Sue) this is ...

(forgetting her name)

Andrea Andrea

Bill Andrea, of course. (Sue looks quizzical) You know, the girl on the TV

Sue Oh Andrea? I didn't recognise you

Andrea Your husband was just telling me you'd seen some of the series . . . (meaning "I know it wasn't that good")

Sue Yes, yes, we both thought it was very good, didn't we?

Bill That's not exactly what I said

Sue (Realising she's putting her foot in it) Well some of it was good ... but other parts we thought weren't really that true to life if you know what I mean

Andrea Yes

Sue (Quickly changing the subject) And you've been going round France I hear?

Andrea Just exploring, really, wandering round farms and villages while Alan gathers material for his next piece

Bill She's been to an audition this morning

Sue Really? And did you get the part?

Andrea I don't know - they said they'd let me know

Sue And what will you do if you don't?

Andrea Either sign on the dole or get a job waitressing - as usual

Sue I couldn't live like that I'm afraid, not knowing from one minute to the next where my next work was coming from

Andrea You get used to it

Bill Sue only has to be off work a week and she wanders round like a bear with a sore head

Sue Of course I'm not - don't take any notice of him ... (Indicating groceries) I'll just put these away

(Awkward pause)

Andrea Has Alan been gone long?

Bill Quite a while

Andrea You don't where I could find him do you?

Bill From what he said you might try looking up by the canal

Andrea How do I get there?

Bill Along the road and follow the footpath sign on the right up the hill - it's quite a climb

Andrea You wont think me rude?

Bill No, no, you do whatever you want

Andrea I'll see you later then

(She goes out. Bill goes to the door of the sick room to ponder his father and Sue bustles in to speak to Andrea ready to prepare lunch)

Sue Do you like tuna Andrea? - oh, she's gone

Bill She's just slipped out to look for Alan

Sue And I was just going to make her some lunch - oh well never mind, it wont go to waste ... aren't some people strange?

(The lights go down on the living room but one remains on the father in bed - the tune "Dirty Old Town" may be played - a light comes up on Alan sitting on a grassy bank overlooking the canal with the town below - Andrea approaches)

Andrea Penny for them?

Alan Hello there - fancy meeting you here - (They embrace) How was the audition?

Andrea Bloody awful - I don't want to talk about it

Alan You knew where to find me then

Andrea Bill said you'd be up here - he said you' d mentioned something about "walking with Dad"

Alan This is where he used to bring us when we were kids

Andrea Its nice - very scenic

Alan On a clear day you can see across three counties from here - I used to come here when things got on top of me - my bolt hole

- from here you can put things into perspective, see them as they really are - it makes big things seem so much less important

Andrea (She points) Look - down there – pigeons

Alan Homers - from the allotments- the working- man' s racehorse

Andrea Eh?

Alan The rich man has his horses, the working-man his pigeons - they fulfill the same purpose

Andrea I love the way they wheel and turn, don't you?

Alan You see the beauty in them - I see only captivity - Man's desire to exercise control

Andrea You've lost me

Alan I used to watch them in the allotments when I was young – see them being trained - they start when they' re very young and keep them hungry then they let them out little by little but all the time holding on to the food supply - bringing it out and shaking the tin when they want them back in - that way they don't lose them and the bird knows who's boss, who's in control - sometimes I used to see one on the rooftop and the bloke below shaking the tin and I used to will it to escape, to just take off and head for the open skies - "Go on you little bugger" I used to say, "Make a break for it" ... but they never did

Andrea The champion of the underdog

Alan My old man had a lot in common with them

Andrea You've lost me again

Alan He spent his life on the railway working for his corn - they didn't give him a lot - just enough to get by - and whenever he felt like taking a chance and heading for the open skies he could never quite face the big decision - the great unknown - he was a good artist in his time

Andrea But he had you two to keep

Alan They used to argue like mad, him and Mum - he wanted to give up work and give painting a try - the old lady wouldn't let him and she kept putting the brake on all the time – its her who should have been the engine driver

Andrea Did you blame her?

Alan Not "blame" ... I suppose I resented her sensibleness. She was probably right – we would probably have starved - on the other hand ...

Andrea Your complex is beginning to show

Alan Is it that obvious?

Andrea I knew it was something to do with the female of the species - is that why you made the break when you did?

Alan I don' t know - I suppose it must have been. He got me a job in the admin office at work and I thought to myself "This is the pigeon coop, son - remember those birds"

Andrea And away you flew

Alan As soon as I saw the door was open

Andrea But wild birds have problems of their own, they sometimes get shot at. You've no regrets?

Alan Not a one, I'd sooner face the risks outside... look at him now - I see him lying there in that bed and I keep remembering our walks up here - we used to walk miles planning for the future - he was going to retire early and set up his own studio – he thought he'd get the odd commission and Bill and I would be able to help him out with business side.

Andrea But it wasn't to be

Alan No it wasn't to be... he kept on working till the very end, sending me a few pounds whenever I got hard up

Andrea Perhaps it was you he did it all for

Alan Perhaps ... and then when he did retire his health failed him and by then it was too late

Andrea At least he kept one of his prize birds at home

Alan You mean Bill? Oh yes, he kept Bill. He was the well-trained one you see, the conformist. He was a bit of an artist as well in his own way - very good on the old piano - Dad used to say the last thing he wanted to hear on this earth was Bill playing the piano - on the other hand he wasn't the adventurous type like me - I mean look at what he married for a start

Andrea There's no need for that

Alan That woman has as much depth as a kiddies' paddling pool.

Andrea I hope you're not going to make me feel uncomfortable while I'm here

Alan I'll do my best (Getting up and reaching for her hand) Come on, I'll show you a place where you can get the best blackberries in the whole world

Andrea Wild ones of course

Alan But of course

(They go off)

(Scene change - back to the house – Bill reading a paper and Sue knitting as she watches TV. Alan and Andrea burst in breathless and laughing from running)

Alan I told you I wasn't past it

Andrea You cheated

Alan I did not

Andrea Your brother's a cheat, Bill, did you know that?

Bill (Subdued) I've known it for years

Alan I think I've just given my last public performance - its time to retire gracefully while the going's good (He drops a bag of blackberries onto Sue's lap - she looks curiously at the plastic bag) We brought you some blackberries - I have to apologise about the bag

(Sue looks pleasantly surprised and begins tasting them)

Andrea We got it off a fisherman

Alan I think he emptied most of the maggots out!

(She quickly dumps it onto the floor with a look of horror)

Andrea He's having you on - it was just a bread wrapper

Bill (Still subdued) I'll put them in the kitchen

(He takes the bag out)

Alan (Following) You have to wash them you know

Sue Have you had a nice walk then?

Andrea Yes. I never knew the countryside round here was as nice

Sue You' d be surprised - lots of people say that – it's the best-kept secret we've got - but keep it to yourself, we don't want everyone knowing

Andrea We've seen some lovely wild flowers

Sue Are you interested in flowers then?

Andrea Oh yes - I couldn't help but notice the front garden - it was obviously one of his hobbies

Sue (Finding a common interest) You haven't seen anything yet - just you wait till you see the back - would you like to?

Andrea If it's not inconvenient

(She takes her by the arm and begins to lead her out)

Sue There are some lovely heathers ...

(Alan comes back with Bill)

Alan So what did the doctor say?

Bill It's not good Alan

Alan Bill ....? (meaning "Get on with it")

Bill (After a deep breath) Susan doesn't know this yet ... there's something called P.V.S. She said that after his last attack he appears to be a typical case

Alan P. V. S? What the hell' s that when it's at home?

Bill (Reluctantly) "Persistent vegetative state" half the brain is working, the half that keeps the body going but the other half, the important bit, isn't

Alan I don't understand

Bill It seems there's a basic side to the nervous system, one side that keeps it going - he might be able to function physically, open his eyes occasionally, squeeze your hand, that kind of thing and he might even look as if he's responding to stimuli but he's not - the other part, the important part, is dead



Alan What does it mean in simple terms?

Bill He's gone, Alan

Alan How the hell can he be gone - he's lying there living and breathing you know what they say, "Where there's life."

Bill There is no hope, not on this occasion - or at least the doctor doesn't think so - that's why they brought him back here

Alan Its only been a month for heavens sake

Bill She says there should have been some improvement by now - there hasn't been

Alan In a month? A bloody month? What's four weeks in a whole lifetime?

Bill I'm only repeating what she said

Alan (Obviously disturbed) And is it really permanent, this PVS?

Bill She said he could be like this for weeks, months, some even live for years

Alan (Turning away) No! Not Dad! I won't believe it

Bill (Following him) You've got to believe it

Alan I'll fight it - do you hear? - I'll get him working again -you wait and see – you hear about these things – the power of will power

(Going into sick room while Bill stands at the door)

Dad? DAD? Its Alan - its Alan, Dad I've been out for a walk up to the canal you know, where you used to take us - its lovely up there at the moment - the place is full of blackberries - I've brought some back for you so you can have them in a pie - you like blackberry pies don't you Dad? Of course you do - I've got a friend with me this time - a girl called Andrea - you'll like her - I'll bring her in in a bit and introduce you - but I don't want you cracking any of those dirty jokes of yours - this one's different, she's a lady - all right?

(Sue and Andrea come back, unaware of the doctor's diagnosis, chatting happily - they hear Alan rambling on and one look from Bill makes them stop talking and join him at the bedroom door)

Alan We ran all the way back here - it nearly bloody killed me, I

can tell you - I'm not as young as I used to be - but then none of us is - by heavens, I remember those walks you used to take us on, me and Bill - it was like a bloody route march - you with your army training, stepping out strong and tall in front and us with our little legs going ten to the dozen trying to keep up with you "What's up?" you used to say, "You surely cant be tired already" but we were, we were knackered - we weren't half glad when you stopped for a rest and to admire the view. Those were the days eh? - we might go up there again one day, you, me and Bill – just like the old days - when you're better that is -when you're feeling more like your old self - its changed a bit up there since we were kids but the view's still as good as ever - it wont be long till you're up there with us, eh? - we'll soon have you back on your feet wont we? What do you say?

(The lights go down on them to show passage of time and when they come up Bill is sitting reading a paper when Alan comes in with a parcel having been out shopping)

Alan I got it

Bill Got what?

Alan The music I was looking for - it took me ages - I had to try four different shops but I found it in the end

Bill What is it?

Alan The one that got broken, remember? Johann Strauss

Bill Do we have to? We've been all through that

Alan But this was -his favourite - he was always playing this

Bill All right - if you insist - give it a try

(Alan puts the music on while Bill continues reading the paper suspecting it wont do any good - Alan goes into the sick room to watch for any reaction and after a while comes back)

Bill Well?

Alan I'm just going to try something else

(He goes to the music centre and changes it - Bill is amazed when he hears the sound of a train noise coming out)

Bill What on earth?!

Alan Trains - it's a special one - its got loads of them on

Bill Alan are you all right?

Alan He was a train driver wasn't he? So what's he going to remember more than this?

Bill I'm going to put the kettle on - would you like one? ... (To Alan who has gone into the room and is ignoring him) Alan - I said do you want a drink?

Alan Eh? Yes - O.K.

Bill Do you want this leaving on?

Alan No, I suppose you can turn it off now - it was just a thought

(Bill goes off)

Come on Dad - open your eyes for just a minute - anything - don't give up on me now (Goes to the window and opens it) look - its a lovely day out there, the birds are singing, the sun is shining - you're not going to leave all this behind are you? - I need you Dad, I know I haven't been the best of sons but I do need you

(Andrea has come in and stands at the bedroom door)

Andrea And I need you, Alan

Alan Oh hello - I didn't hear you come in

Andrea I've seen Bill - he told me

Alan About the music? I thought it was worth a try

Andrea Was it?

Alan What d' you mean, "Was it?" Of course it was

Andrea I don't like saying this, Alan, but it does look like you might be fighting a losing battle

Alan Maybe ... maybe not

Andrea You're causing yourself a whole lot of stress you know

Alan Am I?

Andrea I was talking to Bill last night

Alan Oh yes?

Andrea There are places, Alan, places where they can look after people like your Dad

Alan What places? You mean hospitals?

Andrea No, not hospitals - sanatoriums - they have people there, people who are properly trained

Alan He's not going into any sanitarium

Andrea But it would be for the best - at least he'd be properly looked after

Alan He's being looked after here

Andrea But you can't go on like this - you've got your own life to lead - you haven't written a thing since...

Alan So?

Andrea So you're wasting away as much as he is and Bill and Sue can't look after him forever

Alan Can't they?

Andrea No they can't

Alan What do you want me to do?

Andrea Find your dad a place and come back to London with me - I've got to go back soon

Alan And if I don't?

Andrea Then I'll have to go back on my own - I can't stay here forever and neither can you

Bill (Coming in) She's right Bill, we can't go on like this

Alan Can't we?

Bill No - I know it sounds cruel but...

Alan You're all forgetting one thing

Bill What's that?

Alan This is my Dad ... this here bundle of skin and bones ... my Dad ... this is the man who brought me up, who carried me on his shoulders when I was little, who used to play games with me and chase me and scare me with the stubble on his

chin and when he caught me he would rub it on my face while I screamed with tears of joy for him to stop and at the same time not wanting him to stop because it was fun, it prickled and it hurt me but it was fun - it was my Dad showing that he loved me and I loved him ... and I still love him ... and he's not going into any sanatorium all right ? (he puts his hand to his eyes as he breaks down in tears)

Andrea (Going to him and taking him in her arms) All right Alan ... its all right

(Scene change - late evening in the back garden - Bill is outside with the light streaming through an open door - there is the sound of a blackbird piping as the birds settle down for the night - Andrea comes out - the mood is subdued and calm)

Bill How is he?

Andrea Which one?

Bill You know which one

Andrea He's asleep

Bill He's wearing himself out you know with the worry

Andrea Don't I know it - I wanted him to come back with me but it was a waste of breath. He' s very upset isn't he?

Bill Guilt

Andrea Guilt?

Bill He was the one who went away and I was the one who stayed - after the first few years he tried to make up for it with letters from far away places, fancy presents and that sort of thing but it was always on his mind

Andrea You know what he said the other day? We were watching some pigeons and he said he was the wild one and you were the home bird

Bill Don't think I didn't want to get away

Andrea What's this I hear about you being a musician?

Bill I used to compose a little when I was younger - pretensions of grandeur - silly really

Andrea What did you do with them?

Bill Threw most of them away - the rest are in a drawer

somewhere

Andrea Perhaps you should give them an airing

Bill I don't somehow think the local audiences would quite appreciate them

Andrea You don't know what you can do till you try - why not spread your wings a little?

Bill I think my flying days are over ... when are you going back?

Andrea Tomorrow ... will you keep an eye on him for me?

Bill I suppose so ... my brother's keeper

Andrea If you like

(The lights fade on both rooms to show passing of time - music plays - the lights come up to find Alan looking half shaven slumped asleep in an easy chair next to the bed with whiskey bottle and glass at his feet - the phone in the living room rings and Bill comes in from the kitchen to answer it - Alan sleeps on)

Bill Hello? Oh hello Andrea ... no, nothings changed - Alan's asleep at the moment ... no, in a chair by the bed. I can't get him to sleep in a proper bed - he says he wants to be near him in case he's needed - it's not very healthy actually, he's up half the night talking to him - well, talking to himself really but he likes to think Dad might be able to hear ... I know, I've tried, but you know how stubborn he can be when he digs his heels in ... yes, he's still drinking too much but how do you tell him? He calls it his crutch to help him through ... Yes, she's fine but she's sleeping back at our house again - they had another of their rows ... yes, I know, but what can you do? ... All right, I'll tell him - see you then.

(He puts down the phone and goes back to the kitchen returning with a tray of tea. He pours a cup and goes in the sick room to Alan and gives him a shake)

Bill Alan? I've brought you a cuppa - come on old son

(He begins to stir)

Alan What time is it?

Bill Time you were up and about

Alan (Looking immediately at his dad) Is there any change?

Bill No, there's no change

Alan He squeezed my hand Bill last night, I'm sure he did

Bill (Not impressed) The doctor told you that could happen

Alan But he's never done that before

Bill You're only torturing yourself, raising false hopes

Alan But it's different, something he's never done

Bill All right

(They go into the living room and Alan goes up the bathroom while Bill sets the breakfast table)

Bill (As Alan returns) Do you want any breakfast?

Alan No thanks, tea will do

Bill You've got to eat something you know, you cant live on whiskey

Alan Who says I was - I just have the odd glass to help me sleep

Bill I've been counting the bottles

Alan When I want a guardian angel I'll ask for one, all right?

Bill Suit yourself - you might at least get yourself cleaned up

Alan What for?

Bill Have you looked in a mirror lately?

(pause)

Andrea just phoned

Alan Why didn't you wake me?

Bill I thought you needed your beauty sleep

Alan What did she say?

Bill She's coming back on Friday night ... did I hear the phone last night?

Alan Yes

Bill Who was it?

Alan Just somebody wanting work out of me

Bill I haven't seen you producing much of that

Alan That's because I haven't done any

Bill Shouldn't you be writing something?

Alan Yes

Bill And are you going to?

Alan No

Bill On your head be it ... (He goes to put on a jacket) I've just got to nip round to the shops for some groceries, unless you want to go instead that is?

Alan No, you can have that pleasure

Bill It's no pleasure; believe me - if Sue calls tell her I'll be back in a minute

Alan I can hardly wait

(Bill takes the bag and goes)

(Alan picks up the paper, flicks through a few pages but can't be bothered to read it and throws it down impatiently then goes to the radio and switches it on. There is a phone-in in progress discussing the length of medical waiting lists - he switches it off and sits for a while looking fed up. He then picks up the telephone and dials)

Alan (With pent-up aggression) Hello? Doctor Morris please ... it's Mr. Arnold ... its with reference to my father . . . yes I'll hold . . . What? ... I don't care if she's busy I want to talk to her... no, I cant come to the surgery - if I do I might regret it - yes, I'll hold ... (pause) Dr Morris? I'm sorry if I've disturbed your routine but I needed to talk to you about my father ... no, there's been no change - I'm ringing because I want to know what you're doing about him ... Yes, I know he's an old man, I do know that ... yes, my brother told me all about that but surely there must be something you can do, something you haven't tried yet? ... There isn't? ... Well I don't know, I just thought there might be something ... yes I am upset, that's right, he's my father you see and its very hard to just sit and watch your father fading away in front of you ... I don't know but isn't there anything you can do ? ... There isn't - well what do you suggest we do? ... Give him time? ... Just how much time do we have to give him? ... No I don't want to come and



discuss it with you, I might say something I'll regret ... of course I'm angry, wouldn't you be bloody angry? Well what do you expect?

(He slams the phone down on her)

Useless bloody ...

(There is a pause. He then decides to make an attempt at writing and reaches for his hold all from which he takes a writing pad and pen)

Alan Got to use it, write it out son, write about it

(He sits looking at the blank page then when he cannot write in a fit of temper he throws the pad at the door)

Alan (Throwing pad) Damn it!

(The door opens immediately and Sue appears)

Sue (Chirpily) Hello?

Alan I'm sorry, I didn't know anybody was there

Sue Do you always greet people like that?

Alan I just feel ... feel ... so bloody powerless

Sue Is Bill about?

Alan He's gone down to the shops

Sue I just popped back in the lunch hour to have a word with him - its not quite as far to travel you see - is there anything I can do while I'm here?

Alan Do? What do you mean?

Sue Well, anything I can do to make myself useful?

Alan No ... I don't know ... do whatever you want

Sue I could just have a tidy round I suppose, straighten things up a bit

(She takes off her coat and takes a cloth to begin dusting, much to Alan's obvious annoyance who picks up the paper to hide behind)

Sue I hate lunch times at school, especially wet ones, the kids don't know what to do with themselves and everybody sits

around in the staff room with long faces. I'm pleased if I can get out, believe me ... is there any sign of improvement in your Dad?

Alan Eh?

Sue Any improvement?

Alan No

Sue I was just telling a friend of mine about him - she knows someone who went like that - quite a young man he was - came off his motor bike - three years it lasted - three years of running round visiting hospitals - I said to her "When they get into that condition they're better off gone" - what do you say? - I mean I know its your father and all that but if he's just going to lie there like that you don't know how long it could go on for, do you?

Alan (He has had as much of her as he can take and purposefully puts down the paper and advances towards her putting his face near to hers)

Shut up!

Sue All I meant was –

Alan (Loudly) JUST SHUT IT! SHUT THAT BLOODY AWFUL MOUTH OF YOURS!

(She doesn't know what to do - is frightened - there's a moment's pause then she bursts into tears)

Alan Oh God no, not the tears, please, not the tears

(She cries uncontrollably and sits on the sofa)

(At this moment Bill comes back with the shopping and rushes to her side)

Bill Now what's gone off? I can't leave you alone for two minutes

Alan It's her - she's worse than a bloody budgie twittering on

Sue All I said was –

Alan (Angrily) I don't want to know what you said!

(She runs off in tears)

Bill (Turning on him) And I don't want you upsetting my wife

Alan (Amazed) What?

Bill My wife - she is my wife, for God's sake

Alan Well that's your problem

Bill It isn't my problem, Alan, it's yours - its you that can't get on with her

Alan I don't want to bloody well get on with her I wouldn't care if I never saw the woman again

Bill Don't say that

Alan Why not?

Bill Don't make me choose

Alan Choose between who? Me and her? You can please yourself buddy

Bill You're my brother Alan - we've been through a lot together but I'm not going to stand by and watch you insult her - all right? - she does have feelings you know

Alan You surprise me

Bill I'm warning you - one more set-to like this and that's it - brother or no brother

Alan What' re you saying? Are you threatening me?

Bill All I'm saying is "don't push your luck", all right? I've had just about as much of this as I can take

Alan I think your "wife" is asking for you in the kitchen

(There is a moment's electricity between the two and then Bill turns away and goes to see to Sue - Alan picks up his jacket and goes out slamming the door. Bill comes back comforting Sue)

Bill It all right - he's gone

Sue I can't even speak without him biting my head off

Bill Its all right, I'll have a word with him

Sue You're going to have to because I can't take much more of it

Bill I'll speak to the doctor, I'll ask her about those places, O.K.?

Sue He hasn't been here, he hasn't had to put up with what we've had to put up with - he comes back once a year leaving us to do all the dirty work

Bill He's under a lot of pressure, love, I'm sure he doesn't mean half the things he says

Sue He does

Bill Look - I'll have a word with him - just leave it to me to find the right moment

Sue You'd better make it soon - I can't take much more of this

(The lights go down while the stage is rearranged and when they come up we are at the end of a dinner with all four characters present. The mood has changed and is unusually friendly and relaxed after several glasses of wine but we can still see the old man in the bed next door)

Alan I don't often say this, Sue, but that was a most excellent meal

Andrea Good heavens - the compliments are really flying

Sue It was nothing, just something I found in a recipe book

Alan We shall have to acquire the said book - (To Andrea) Make a note of it Miss Smith - I only wish my present partner could cook as well as that

Andrea You cheeky thing, I give you some wonderful meals

Alan "Wonderful" if you like nut roast and vegetarian cutlets - (looking at Andrea) still I suppose you can't be good-looking, a wonderful actress and a good cook all in one

Andrea Watch it you - and just think about what you're saying

Alan No offence meant to present company

Sue More wine anyone?

(She goes round each in turn)

Bill No thanks

Alan Go on then

Andrea Just a little

Alan A meal like that deserves a *raison d'etre* - we really should be celebrating something

Bill We are, we're celebrating Andrea getting her part

Alan That's true - a toast is in order I think - to Andrea!

All To Andrea!

Andrea It might be a little premature; I haven't seen the full script yet

Alan I'm sure you'll be fine - he's a wonderful writer - nearly as good as me in fact

Andrea There's praise indeed

Alan All it needs now is some coffee and mints

Sue We haven't had the cheese board yet

Alan Good heavens - cheese and crackers - I'm coming to this restaurant again

Sue (Taking up some plates she turns to Andrea) You couldn't just give me a hand could you?

Andrea Of course

(They go out to the kitchen)

Bill Its nice to see you and Sue on speaking terms again

Alan I would speak to anyone who could serve me food like that - I can see now why you've stayed on the straight and narrow

Bill When is Andrea going back?

Alan Monday she said

Bill And are you going with her?

Alan I can't very well can I? - Not while Dad's in his present state

Bill I've been meaning to speak to you about that Alan - I saw the doctor again yesterday

Alan Oh yes? And what did she have to say for herself?

Bill Not a lot - I was asking her about the alternatives - you know, places where they could look after him

Alan I've told you, I don't want him going into any sanatorium - I've seen them - they're like left luggage offices where they

occasionally rearrange the parcels

Bill Not this one she was telling me about - they have relaxed visiting times, you can go in whenever you want and there's all mod cons its a bit on the expensive side but –

Alan For the last time - no - I'd sooner we looked after him ourselves

Bill But we cant - it would mean either me or Sue giving up our job - Alan, face up to reality - he's not going to get any better

Alan How do you know? How can you be certain? Do you have a direct line to the God-force? You know what they say, "Where there's life." While ever he has that drip in his arm its keeping him going and we don't know if one day he isn't going to just sit up and ask for his morning paper, now do we?

Bill I think you're letting your emotions cloud the reality

Alan Why? Do you have an alternative?

Bill (After slight pause) I do as a matter of fact . . . I don't think you'll like it - I was hoping I could make you see sense

Alan I am seeing sense - I'm not sending my father away to any sanatorium to be forgotten – what's your alternative?

(Hesitant pause)

Bill You've already mentioned it

Alan What?

Bill (Deliberately) "While ever he has that drip in his arm . . . "

Alan (As the reality dawns of what Bill's suggesting) Bill? What the hell are you saying? I don't think I like the sound of this

Bill It would be very easy

Alan No!

Bill Just think for a moment

Alan Think about what?

Bill No-one would know

Alan Know? Know? I would know for God's sake. Do you know what you're saying? Do you know what that's called? There's a word for what you're suggesting

Bill I know and don't think I like saying it but I can't think of any alternative - I've been wracking my brains - one thing is for sure, if we carry on the way we are doing either one or both of us is going to end up having a nervous breakdown

Alan It's not some stranger you're talking about you know - that old man through there is Dad - our Dad

Bill It's not Dad - the Dad we used to know has long since gone - Alan how would you feel if you were in his place? Would you want to go on living if you were in that state? Well would you?

Alan Obviously not

Bill Well don't you think we owe it to him?

Alan Owe it to him? Owe him what? To take away his one final chance?

Bill To let him go peacefully and with dignity- this is no way for him to end it - this isn't what he would have wanted for himself now is it?

Alan Of course not but ...

Bill He often used to say he didn't want to be a burden to us in his old age

Alan That was just talk

Bill It wasn't talk, he meant it - you know he couldn't stand relying on people

Alan He was certainly a stubborn old so-and-so what am I saying "was"? - He still is

Bill I wouldn't be suggesting it if I thought there was any other way, I've thought about it hard and long ... so what do you say?

(Dramatic pause while he decides which way to jump)

Alan I'm his son for God's sake

Bill And I'm his son as well

Alan I don't know what to say - I'm lost for words - have you said

anything about this to the others?

Bill No, of course not, I wanted to discuss it with you first - I think its better that we keep it to ourselves

(At which point the Sue and Andrea come through the door carrying the cheese board and coffee and catching the end of the conversation)

Sue (Cheerfully) Keep what to yourselves? What are you two planning now?

Alan Are you going to tell her?

Sue Tell her what?

Bill (Meaning "Don't") Alan –

Alan (Making up his mind against the idea and becoming emotional again) Bill and I have just been having a little chat about a problem we both share, a problem we all share in fact... the problem is the remains of that old man through there that we once used to know as 'father' - now as you know father hasn't been very well lately, in fact he hasn't been feeling his old self at all - he' s become quite a burden to one and all in fact - so much of a burden that brother Bill originally wanted to ship him off to some old folks scrap yard where he could spend his last days in peace without bothering the rest of the world - but Iwouldn't buy that, would I Bill ? I wouldn't wear it - so he's come up with another alternative, something that's even simpler and much more tidy - you want to know what it is? The perfect solution really, the answer to all our prayers - (To Bill) Should I tell them?

(Moved by Alan's attack Bill gets up and escapes to the piano and with tears in his eyes begins to play while Alan continues to goad him, getting more and more emotional and loud above the playing)

You'd think that a father who'd brought up two sons would have been respected by them wouldn't you '? You'd think they'd do their best for him and stick by him through thick and thin right to the very end - but unfortunately filial love can wear a bit thin sometimes - after all, how much can a father expect of his offspring? I mean the fact that he's spent his whole life struggling to bring them up, has scrimped and saved for them is wonderful, its to be greatly applauded but it shouldn't be allowed to cloud the real issue when times get tough and the going gets hard - after all people have their own lives to lead don't they? And you can't expect them to go on looking after him forever - so the solution is quite simple when you look at it 'rationally', when you give it some 'serious'



consideration - if father is a problem then like all problem all you have to do to get rid of them is to erase them, to simply rub them out.

The only trouble is how do you set about it? How do you perform such an onerous task? An overdose of morphine perhaps or a pillow over the face? No - that would be messy and could lead to complications - we wouldn't want any of those now would we? So what's the answer? What do you think? - I suppose there's no decision really - if the old man's being kept alive by a tube in his arm and isn't showing any signs of improvement the simplest and tidiest way would be just to remove the tube, wouldn't it? After all it could happen, quite accidentally couldn't it?

So who's going to do it then? Who's going to pull the plug and give us all a bit of peace '? Is it going to be you, brother, or me? I'm asking you - or perhaps we could ask one of the ladies to perform the task for us - like the launching of an ocean going liner, the cutting of the tape on a new building, only this time its the cutting of the lifeblood, the pulling of the plug - it wont take long, will it? Just a second - and it wont hurt him in the least - just like going to the dentists really . . . So who' s going to do it then? Who's it to be? Well? WELL?

(Bill ends the playing with a loud bang on the piano and turns with tears in his eyes to face Alan. Andrea, who has been standing near the open door of the sick room has seen something, which the others haven't, and in the electric silence before Bill has time to reply she quietly speaks)

Andrea No-one's going to do it

(They all turn towards her)

Alan What?

Andrea I don't think anyone will have to do anything now

(They look at each other then towards the sick room where the father's head has fallen ominously onto his chest. The blackout comes down for the end of the first act)