

Anniversary

By

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Cast: Tom Venables, mid 60s.

Evelyn Venables, Tom's wife, early 60s.

Heather Venables, their daughter-in-law, mid 30s.

Cathy Venables, their daughter, mid 30s.

James Venables, their son, early 30s.

The set is the kitchen of a lower middle class home. There are two exits, one leads to the garden/marquee, the other leads to the hallway/front door. In one corner of the kitchen, rising from a colourful box, is a large helium balloon. Emblazoned across it is: 'Happy 40th Wedding Anniversary!'. Most of the time members of the cast are busy preparing food etc.

Notes:

' . . .' in the middle of a sentence indicates hesitation, searching for the right words, at the end of a sentence indicates trailing off.

} indicates lines begin at the same time.

– at the end of a sentence indicates words cut off by next speaker.

Tom. *[Enter Tom from garden. He bustles around the kitchen in a preoccupied way muttering to himself..]*

Busy. Everybody's busy. What makes them think I'm not busy?
I'm busy.

Look at the time. Just look at it.

List. Yes, make a list. Write it all out. Mustn't forget anything.

[Writing.]

Layout tables. Set places. Cutlery. Cutlery. Glasses. Chairs!

Yes. List it all out.

Things to do. Reminders. Mustn't forget anything.

[Writing.]

Oh yes *[beaf]* must stop talking to myself.

[Potters around the kitchen.]

Where is she?

[Peers at the clock.]

She should be back by now. Never should've let her do that stupid job. I'll have to do everything at this rate.

[Sniffs, suddenly remembers.]

Oh no!

[Rushes to the oven, opens door, smoke billows out. He removes an oven tray full of burnt sausage rolls.]

Shit. Shit. Shit.

[Picks one up, too hot to handle, juggles with it and drops it on the floor. Puts on oven glove and tries to scrape off charred top of sausage roll.]

Bloody things. Bloody, bloody, things.

Oh shit.

This is no good.

Trying to do too many things at once.

[Sound of front door opening as Evelyn enters the house.]

Evelyn *[voice off.]*

I'm home.

Tom Oh God.

Evelyn Hellooo.

Tom In the kitchen.

Evelyn *[Enter Evelyn still wearing a white satin sash across her chest saying 'Welcome' from her volunteer job as a hospital welcomer.]*

Hello dear.

Tom Hello.

Evelyn Getting on all right?

Tom Lots to do.

Evelyn What's that smell?

Tom Sausage rolls.

Evelyn You've ruined them.

Tom They're just a bit well done.

Evelyn We can't serve these.

Tom If you'd've been here I wouldn't've had to do it.

Evelyn Oh, so it's my fault is it?

Tom In a manner of speaking.

Evelyn I told you I'd do them when I got back.

Tom We have to get on.

Evelyn *[Tipping burnt rolls into the waste bin and looking in fridge.]*

I've got a reserve supply somewhere. Just as well.

Tom I did my best.

Evelyn What - to burn down the house?

Tom Don't exaggerate.

Evelyn You know you can't cook.

Tom I thought it would be one less thing for you to do.

Evelyn It was just as well I went in. It was very busy. Mabel wouldn't've been able to cope on her own.

Tom No sense of priority.

Evelyn She's not very good at coping at the best of times.

Tom I don't see what they need 'Welcomers' for anyway.

Evelyn People get lost.

Tom They should read the bloody map.

Evelyn It's a very big hospital. It's confusing.

Tom Got all the wards marked on the map, any fool could find their way around.

Evelyn It's 'Customer Care'. Greeting people. Making them feel welcome.

Tom Load of nonsense.

Evelyn It is not.

Tom Bloody waste of time.

Evelyn I do wish you wouldn't belittle everything I do.

Tom I do not.

Evelyn You should hear yourself sometimes. It's embarrassing.

Tom I do not belittle you. You belittle you. You wouldn't let me put your pictures up.

Evelyn They're not good enough.

Tom I think they're -

Evelyn When they're good enough you can put one up.

Tom What about that landscape with the stag? I like that.

Evelyn His legs are a bit wonky.

Tom I thought they were meant to look like that.

Evelyn No.

Tom Are you going to wear that all day?

Evelyn What?

Tom The blasted sash. You look like Miss World.

Evelyn Oh, I forgot I had it on.

Tom Ludicrous bloody thing.

Evelyn It's my badge of office.

Tom Making an exhibition of yourself.

Evelyn Oh God, I must've had it on in the Post Office! I thought people were giving me funny looks.

Tom I tell you what would be welcome round here.

Evelyn What?

Tom Some help. That'd be welcome.

Evelyn I am helping. What d'you think I'm doing?

Tom I mean the kids. Where are they? Not one of 'em turned up yet. Look at the time. It's too bad. They promised me – faithfully - they'd be here to help. And where are they? That's what I'd like to know.

Evelyn They'll be here soon.

Tom They'd better.

Evelyn I expect they got held up.

Tom They're always getting 'held up'.

Evelyn Traffic.

Tom Don't allow enough time for things, that's what it is.

Evelyn There's a nasty jam in the high street.

Tom Sometimes I think I'm the only one who takes things seriously.

Evelyn I told you, I tried to get out of it but I couldn't.

Tom There's a lot to do.

Evelyn I don't need you to tell me that. I've been slaving for days preparing food for this party.

It makes you wonder if it's worthwhile.

Tom What d'you mean?

Evelyn I don't know why we're having it.

Tom Everybody has a party for their 40th anniversary!

Evelyn Just because our friends did it doesn't mean we have to.

Tom It'd look odd. Besides, you wanted a party.

Evelyn I did not. You're the one who wants a party.

Tom You told me you were looking forward to it.

Evelyn Well I'm not.

Tom You like parties.

Evelyn No I don't!

Tom Celebrate.

Evelyn Forty years of marriage and you don't know I don't like parties.

Tom You always look like you're enjoying yourself to me.

Evelyn How would you know? You always ignore me at parties.

Tom Nonsense. That is just -

Evelyn Another excuse to get drunk with your Round Table friends.

Tom Now don't -

Evelyn They're all your friends. Not my friends. I haven't got any friends.

Tom What about Mabel?

Evelyn She isn't a friend. She's lonely, and sad, and a bit of an idiot, and I feel sorry for her.

Tom I thought -

Evelyn You don't think. That's your problem.

Tom Now, I -

Evelyn You never think about anybody but yourself.

Tom What!

Evelyn Self, self, sel -

Heather [*Enter Heather unexpectedly from garden.*]

Hello. Hope I'm not interrupting.

Tom Heather! How lovely to see you.

Evelyn Hello Heather.

Tom This is a surprise.

Evelyn A lovely surprise.

Tom I thought you weren't coming.

Heather I changed my mind.

Evelyn That's nice.

Tom Yes.

Heather I decided to come.

It was an impulse.

I do a lot of things on impulse these days.

I hope you don't mind?

Tom No, no, of course not.

Evelyn Lovely to have you.

Heather Am I early?

Tom No. Everyone else is late.

Heather I'll just dump my bag.

Evelyn Yes, good idea.

[*Exit Heather.*]

What's she doing here?

Tom Wants to help, I suppose.

Evelyn As if it isn't difficult enough . . .

Tom We must make her feel welcome.

 The more the merrier.

Evelyn I thought she was supposed to be having a breakdown?

Tom Perhaps she's better.

Evelyn Huh. I hope she isn't going to act peculiar.

Tom Seems all right to me.

Evelyn You know how weird she went at Nigel's funeral.

Tom Well, I mean, she was distraught.

Evelyn We controlled ourselves.

Tom Yes, dear.

Evelyn You can't be too careful. You know how people leap to conclusions.

Heather [*Enter Heather.*]

 What happened to Nigel's photos?

Evelyn Photos?

Heather The photos of Nigel. They're not there.

Tom I took them all down. Evelyn got upset every time she saw them.

Evelyn And you. You got upset too.

Tom Yes, yes, we all got upset.

Heather I see.

Tom Too upsetting. So we took them down. Sorry.

Heather No, no, that's okay. I was just [*beat*] expecting them . . .

Evelyn How was the journey?

Heather Fine. Okay. You know.

Tom Good. Good.

Evelyn [beat] We weren't expecting you . . . we thought -

Heather I wanted to come. I hope that's all right?

Evelyn Yes, yes, of course, of course.

Heather I want to help. Be a part.

Evelyn Yes, yes, marvellous, good.

Tom It was just, you know, we thought you might, not feel up to it.

Heather I'm fine.

Tom You are?

Heather Really, yes, fine.

Tom Good . . .

Evelyn We could certainly do with a hand, couldn't we Tom.

Tom Yes.

Heather What a lovely balloon!

Tom Yes, clever, isn't it.

Evelyn Cathy sent it. She likes to make big gestures.

Heather What a charming idea.

Evelyn Always was one to make a dramatic statement, right from a little girl.

Tom She's a live wire, our Cathy.

Evelyn I expect she'll be here soon. And James and Susannah, of course, they're coming too.

Tom Yes, they all said they'd pull together, all the family.

Heather It's good to be here.

Evelyn I'm so glad you could make it.

Heather Reminds me of happier times.

Tom Yes, yes, just like old times.

Heather Yes.

Evelyn Well.

Tom Yes.

Heather I expect there's lots to do.

Evelyn Many hands make light work.

Heather [*Glancing out of the kitchen window into the garden.*]
It's a very big tent.

Tom Marquee. For the guests. Thought it better than cluttering up the house with people.

Heather Yes, good idea.

Tom Went up yesterday.

Heather I bet you've been looking forward to the party.

Evelyn Yes, yes, of course we have.

Tom It's a very special occasion for us.

Heather Yes, forty years, what an achievement. I always thought, you know, that Nigel and I . . . that we'd . . .

Evelyn Yes, dear, so did we, so did we. . .

Tom And you would have, if not for . . .

Heather [*Sad silence.*]

Evelyn Still, the time you did have together was happy, wasn't it, that's the main thing.

Heather Yes, we were very happy.

Evelyn Quality, not quantity, that's the important thing.

Tom That's right.

Heather Yes, yes, I suppose so. But when something's good you just want it to go on and on, don't you. You two know that.

Evelyn Yes, of course we do.

Tom Yes.

Heather If something's good you want it to last forever. Is that greedy?

Evelyn No dear, no, it's not greedy, it's natural.

Heather [*Becoming tearful.*]
It's so unfair.

Evelyn There, there . . .

Tom [*Coughs awkwardly.*]

Heather I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do this.

Evelyn You let it out, dear.

Heather Don't want to spoil the fun.

Evelyn No chance of that.

Heather I came to help. Be useful.

Evelyn Of course you did.

Tom It wouldn't be the same without you, Heather.

Heather Thanks.

Evelyn Come on then, lets get to work. All hands to the pumps.

Heather What would you like me to do?

Evelyn Wash the salad things would you dear, while I stuff these vol-au-vents.

Heather Okay.

[*They all work.*]

Tom Do you think two cases of wine is enough?

Evelyn I should hope so. But the way some of your friends drink.

Tom There's plenty of beer.

Evelyn [*Evelyn gets a cut-glass bowl out of a cupboard.*]

Heather What a lovely bowl!

Evelyn It's nice, isn't it. Forty years old today. It was a wedding gift. I can't remember who gave it to us now. Do you remember, Tom?

Tom Haven't a clue.

Heather Wow, it's really heavy.

Evelyn Yes, cut-glass.

Heather It's beautiful.

Evelyn It's been with us all our married life. Through all the moves and never even got a chip. I like to use it now and again, for special occasions, you know, Christmas, stuff like that.

[*They work.*]

Heather I thought, while I was here, I could get some of Nigel's things.

Evelyn Things?

Heather Yes, things, things he left at home. Childhood things.

Evelyn I don't think we have any.

Heather That's odd. He told me. He said he'd left his childhood things: toys, games, books, stuff like that.

Evelyn They must've got thrown out.

Heather You didn't keep them?

Evelyn I don't remember. Why d'you want them?

Heather Just being sentimental, I suppose, I've been going through his things and I remembered him telling me, you see.

Tom Perhaps they're in the loft. His things. They might be up there.

Heather D'you mind if I go up and look?

Evelyn Now?

Heather If it's all right?

Tom Oh, okay, um, there's a ladder in the cupboard on the landing.
Be careful won't you.

Heather [*Heather exiting.*]
Yes, don't worry about me.

Evelyn You're being very helpful today, aren't you?

Tom [*Doorbell rings, musical chimes.*]

I'll get it.

Evelyn *[Evelyn sits at table looking suddenly exhausted.]*

Tom *[Voice off.]*
You're late.

Cathy *[Voice off.]*
Hi Dad, lovely to see you too.

Cathy *[Enter Tom and Cathy.]*
Hi Mum.

Evelyn *[Quickly assumes public persona.]*
Cathy, dear.
Oh good, more troops. Tom does get so het-up when people are late.

Tom I thought you were going to get here for ten.

Cathy Got held up in traffic.
[Looking at the balloon.]
Oh good it arrived in time.

Evelyn Oh yes, dear, it's lovely. Thank you very much. I was only saying to
Heather how thoughtful it was.

Cathy Heather's here?

Evelyn She wanted to help.

Cathy Course she does Mum, we all want to help.

Tom I wondered what on earth it was when they delivered it.

Cathy Thought it was a bomb did you?

Tom Don't be silly.

Cathy *[Looking out the window.]*
Good grief, what's that!

Tom Marquee – for the party.

Cathy It's enormous. How many people are you expecting?

Tom We've a lot of friends coming. Peter and Esme are travelling up from Torquay.

Cathy Wouldn't it be funny if the tent collapsed in the middle of the party?

Tom No, it would not. And it won't. It's solid as a rock. D'you know, one man put it up all on his own. I was very impressed. Of course he knew what he was doing.

Evelyn I was worried it wouldn't fit in the garden.

Tom I had it all measured out.

Evelyn I thought he'd miscalculated.

Tom Planning. It pays off every time. It's very comfortable inside – want to look?

Cathy Later Dad, I've got to get going on the food. [*to Evelyn.*] I thought I'd make my vegetarian ragout.

Evelyn Oh, that's nice, dear.

Cathy I've brought my own ingredients – they're organic.

Evelyn Oh.
That's nice.

Cathy I'll just get on with it, shall I?

Evelyn Yes, yes.
[*They all work.*]

Evelyn How's life in London?

Cathy Oh, fine, fine. I just got a new job filming a 'reality' TV show.

Evelyn Oh that's nice. Tell me what it's called and I'll look out for your name at the end.

Cathy It's called 'Fame Files'. It's the usual wish fulfilment, make-over kinda programme where they take a bunch of wannabe pop stars off the street and put them through a series of humiliating tasks for the

amusement of our viewers.

Evelyn Oh yes, sounds interesting.

Cathy It's got all the usual ingredients, laughter, tears, and the winner gets a car, a flat, recording contract and a lifetime supply of coke.

Evelyn Ooo what a lot.

Cathy It makes a nice change working on a programme where I'm not the most nervous person on set.

Tom Evelyn, I've made a plan of the seating arrangement.

Cathy Make sure you don't put the French President next to George Bush.

Evelyn Don't be silly.

Heather *[Enter Heather holding a notebook.]*

Cathy Hi Heather.

Heather Hi.

Tom Find anything?

Heather Not much.

Evelyn I didn't think you would.

Heather Just this.

[Shows Evelyn Nigel's diary.]

Evelyn How sweet. Still, we can't stand around reading all day, can we?

Tom About the layout -

Cathy *[to Heather]*

I hope this doesn't turn into one of those rowdy parties.

Tom Of course it won't.

Cathy In the old days their parties used to turn into right orgies.

Evelyn Don't be silly, Cathy, you'll give Heather the wrong idea.

Cathy *[Pointing at the bowl.]*

Hello, I see you got something for them to throw their car keys into.

Evelyn It's for the fruit-salad.

Tom [*Looking down his to-do list.*]
I'm sure I've forgotten something.

Cathy Condoms? Baby-oil? Towels?

Tom Don't be stupid.

Evelyn I don't know where she gets it from.

Cathy It must be in the blood.

Tom Nonsense.

Cathy It's true. It's all in the genes.

I read it in the Daily Mail so it must be true.

Tom Well you don't get your sense of humour from me.

Cathy Very true.

Evelyn I don't care where it comes from it's not nice.

Cathy I'm only having a bit of a joke.

Tom And who's paying for your jokes?

Cathy Nobody. They're all free – it's a public service.

[*They work in silence. Heather leafs through the notebook.*]
Where's James?

Tom He's not here yet.

Cathy At least I wasn't the last to arrive.

Tom As usual.

Tom Evelyn, I want to show you how I envisage the layout working.

Evelyn Now?

Tom I want you to check it before we start laying out the tables.

Evelyn I'm in the middle of my vol-au-vents.

Tom It won't take long.

Evelyn Oh, all right. Heather, if you're not busy, could you finish these off for

me?

Heather Okay.

[*Exit Tom and Evelyn.*]

Cathy [Pause.]

Phew. Bit tense, isn't it.

Heather A little.

Cathy I didn't expect to see you here. I'd've stayed away if I could.

Heather I wasn't going to come, then I thought it might do me good.

Cathy I wish I had a good excuse not to come. I'd've grabbed it with both hands.

Heather [*Silence.*]

Cathy Oh, sorry, didn't mean it like that.

Heather That's okay. I know you don't -

Cathy It's just I've been dreading coming up for this. They always give me such a hard time.

Heather Poor you.

Cathy What've you got there?

Heather Nigel's diary.

Cathy Ooooooh. Let's have a look.

Heather I shouldn't think it's very racy, he was only ten when he wrote it.

Cathy Oh how cute. Let's see.

[*Heather hands Cathy the book.*]

"Property of Nigel Venables, private, hands off. Death to anyone who reads this without permission."

He probably meant me.

Heather He can spell "permission"..

Cathy [*Cathy hands book back.*]

Always was precocious.

Anything interesting?

Heather I don't think so. Just, you know, school stuff.

Cathy Probably why I never kept a diary.

Never had anything interesting to record.

God, I'm so tired.

I could barely drag myself out of bed this morning. The thought of having to come to another family fiasco drained all my energy. And Lucy was sulking because she didn't want me to go.

Heather How are things between you two?

Cathy Great. We've decided to live together.

Heather Really! How wonderful.

Cathy Yeah, it's kind of scary and exciting all at the same time.

Heather So this is the 'real thing'.

Cathy I hope so. It's definitely never been this good before.

Heather I'm so pleased for you. Especially after . . .

Cathy She who must not be named!

Heather Yes.

Cathy Exactly. It's such a relief to be with someone who isn't so jealous. Me just looking at another woman made her sulk for a week.

Heather I don't know how you stuck it.

Cathy Me neither. But I guess you just get used to living in your own nightmare and forget to wake up.

Heather Is she still posting that stuff about you on the internet?

Cathy I don't know. Who cares? It's all behind me now; I'm just looking to the future.

Lucy wanted to come, but I couldn't let her. . .

Heather You should've brought her.

Cathy No way!

Heather Why not?

Cathy Why not? They'd both have heart attacks if they knew their "little girl" was living with another woman.

Heather You never know; you might be pleasantly surprised.

Cathy I don't think so. They're so old-fashioned they still think being gay is a disease.

They believe people can only be happy if they're married, with a mortgage weighing them down and bringing up 2.4 children to be just like them.

In fact they'd be ecstatic about James if only he'd get a move on and make Susannah pregnant.

But I don't suppose James has any time for sex - too busy conquering the business world.

Heather It'll be nice to see James again.

Cathy Yeah, course. We should all stay in touch.

I meant to call you lots of times but, you know . . .

Heather Yeah, I know.

Cathy I think you're so brave.

Heather I don't feel very brave.

Cathy Well you are. Turning up here for one thing.

Heather I'm not sure why I do anything these days.

I thought maybe, if I came here . . . be with the family . . . it'll . . . I don't know . . . settle things.

But I don't think it's going to work. I'm too angry. Perhaps I shouldn't've come.

Seeing them together, so smug, so . . . oh I don't know what. It just makes me want to smash something.

Cathy I know the feeling.

Heather The nights are the worst.

You know, I dream about Nigel almost every night.

I'm searching for him in some big anonymous place, like a warehouse or something, it keeps changing, and I know that if only I can find him, talk to him, I can get him back.

But I always get lost, running down endless corridors, searching all the rooms, but they're full of strangers and I search and search all night and I never find him.

I wake up exhausted.

Cathy You poor thing.

Heather It's not fair dying, he wasn't supposed to die, not like that, not without me.

Cathy I know . . . I know.

Heather It makes me so angry.

I just can't come to terms with how unfair it all is.

Cathy It's bound to take time.

Heather Yes, that's what everyone says. Time the great healer. But I'm not so sure. As time goes on the feelings just get deeper.

I suppose I'm still stuck in the past.

Cathy You need to start living your own life now.

Heather That's what a friend said. She got me to go to one of those speed dating things.

Cathy Wow. What was it like?

Heather Horrible.

Cathy Oh dear.

Heather Even when I was talking to a man who was moderately interesting I couldn't concentrate on anything he was saying; all the time I was thinking, "You're not Nigel, you're not Nigel, where's Nigel? I want Nigel."

And then, when he said, "And what about you?" I blurted out something stupid like, "My husband died in a car crash nine months ago and I can't stop wishing I'd told him how much I loved him before he drove away."

Then he checked his watch hoping his time was up.

Cathy Bastard!

Evelyn [*Enter Tom and Evelyn.*]
Language Cathy.

Tom We could always put the Finlays with the McNallys.

Evelyn It really doesn't matter.

Tom Or I could combine two small tables into a larger one, would that be better?

Evelyn I'm leaving it up to you, Tom.

Evelyn How are you getting on, Cathy?

Cathy Oh God, I've got to put the veggies on!

Evelyn You'd better get a move on. I'll need the hob later.

Cathy Yes, Mum.

Evelyn [*Inspecting Heather's work.*]
There's a bit much in these cases, Heather dear, d'you think you could even them up a bit?

Heather I'll do my best.

Evelyn Shall I do it?

Heather No, no, I'm okay. I'm sure I can handle a few vol-au-vents.

Evelyn Yes, I'm sure you can.

Tom How's my Cathy?

Cathy Okay.

Tom Seeing anyone special these days?

Cathy No, not really.

Tom Don't hide yourself away, Cathy, you've got a lot to offer.

Cathy Yes, Dad.

Evelyn Did we tell you the McNallys are grandparents now?

Cathy No.

Evelyn Their Mary had twins just the other week. They do go on about it.
You'd think no one'd ever had twins before.

Tom They're very proud.

Evelyn Yes, yes, they are. All our friends have got grandchildren now, haven't
they, Tom.

Tom Yes.

Cathy That's nice for them.

Evelyn Yes, yes, it is. [to Heather.] I always said Cathy would make a lovely
mother.

Cathy No you didn't! You said I was selfish and unreliable.

Evelyn Really, Cathy, I never said any such thing.

Tom We just want you to be happy.

Cathy I'm perfectly happy the way I am, thank you.

Tom Whatever happened to that nice young chap you were seeing? What
was his name? Stephen, wasn't it?

Cathy Dad, that was ages ago.

Tom I liked him.

Cathy He told me I stifled him.

Tom Oh.

Evelyn Our Cathy's very choosy, aren't you dear.

Cathy He left me!

Evelyn Yes, I know, but you like to pick and choose, don't you. Waiting for someone just right.

Tom You can't afford to wait too long.

Cathy I'm not waiting for anything!

Evelyn Of course you're not, dear.

Tom I expect one'll be along soon.

Cathy You mean like buses?

Tom All I was saying was -

Cathy Can we please drop this?

Evelyn I'm sure you'll meet someone nice one day.

Tom What on earth is keeping James? Look at the time.

Evelyn It's not like him to be late. I do hope everything's all right.

Tom He'd better get a move on.

Heather Don't worry, we've got the food under control.

Tom I'm relying on him to bring the champagne for the toasts.

Evelyn He must've got held up.

Tom If he doesn't arrive soon we won't have enough time to chill the champagne properly.

Cathy *[Pulls out mobile phone.]*
I'll give him a ring.

Tom What?

Cathy I've got his mobile number in here somewhere.
[Operates phone. Listens.]

He's got it switched off.

Tom [Sighs.] Typical.

Cathy I don't know why people have mobiles when they keep them switched off all the time.

Evelyn I expect he's driving.

Heather I'm sure he'll be here soon.

Tom He'd better. Just when I'm depending on him. I knew I should've done it myself, but no, "You've got enough to do, Dad," he said, "I'll get it for you."

Evelyn I do hope he's driving carefully.

Tom I should've done it myself. If you want something done properly it's the only way.

Evelyn You don't think he could've had an accident?

[Awkward, silence.]

I don't know why I said that. No of course not. Of course he hasn't had an accident, he's just late, that's all.

Tom I'd better pop round to the off-licence and get a few bottles, just in case he doesn't get here in time.

Evelyn Yes, Tom, that's a good idea.

Tom [Muttering.] Want something done you have to do it yourself.

[Exit Tom. Sound of front door slamming.]

Evelyn He's driving me mad.

Heather He seems a bit tense.

Evelyn I'm sorry about Tom. He does get worked up about things these days. Frankly, he's been driving me up the wall over the preparations for this party.

Heather I suppose he's worried about James.

Evelyn He wants everyone to run around after him. You know what he's like, don't you, Cathy. I don't know how I've put up with it all these years. Barking his orders around as if he was on a parade ground.

Heather I expect he's just a bit anxious. I'm sure he'll calm down once the party's underway.

Evelyn Yes, Heather dear, I expect you're right. He means well. I think part of the problem is he's bored. He's been getting under my feet ever since he retired. He follows me around the house keeping an eye on everything I do. And you should see what he's like when we go shopping: why are you buying this? what's that for? how much is this?

Cathy You'll be looking forward to the next forty years together then.

Evelyn It's no joking matter Cathy.

Cathy No Mum.

Evelyn He gets so critical over the least little thing.

Cathy Maybe you should find him a job.

Evelyn If only. He needs something to occupy him.

Cathy I know! He could be a scary lollipop man giving the kids nightmares.

Evelyn Don't be flippant Cathy, it's not helpful.

 [Pause.]

 I do hope James and Susannah get here soon.

Heather I'm sure they'll be here in time for the party.

Evelyn I just wish the blasted thing was over. Makes you wonder why you bother.

Cathy You'll be all right once it gets started.

Evelyn You do know we're only having it so he can show off in front of all his friends?

Cathy Who's coming?

Evelyn Oh the usual crowd; mostly from the Round Table.

Cathy God, you've known that lot for donkey's years.

Evelyn I expect you'll recognise them all when they turn up.

Cathy Are Bill and Enid Wakehurst coming?

Evelyn Of course. They're our best friends.

Cathy I never much liked them.

Evelyn Me neither.

Cathy Enid's all right, but Bill [*she shudders*]

Evelyn I thought you liked him. He liked you.

Cathy He always gave me the creeps. I could feel his eyes wandering all over me.

Evelyn I never did take to him.

Heather I don't think I've met them, have I?

Evelyn Probably not.

Cathy There's another thing to look forward to.

Evelyn You look pale. You are looking after yourself aren't you, Cathy?

Cathy I'm all right, Mum.

Evelyn You've got to make the most of yourself, at your age.

Cathy Thanks.

Evelyn Seeing anyone special at the moment?

Cathy No. Not particularly.

Evelyn But you do go out, don't you, you don't lock yourself away at home.

Cathy Don't worry Mum. Like any self-respecting permanent adolescent I'm out clubbing most nights, different man every week whether I want one or not.

Evelyn Don't be facetious. You know what I mean.

Cathy Don't worry Mum. I'm not hibernating.

Heather I've been on a date.

Evelyn Oh that's good.

Cathy What was it like?

Heather A disaster.

Evelyn Oh, what a shame.

Heather He was soooo boring. I was treated to a long monologue about conspiracy theories. Eveything meant something else. Nothing just happened. He said Princess Diana was murdered by Masons working for the Royal Family.

Evelyn Oh dear.

Cathy Thank God Dad never joined, he'd always be out on hit jobs.

Heather By the end of the meal I was feeling quite paranoid.

Cathy It's catching.

Evelyn Better luck next time, eh Heather.

Heather Yeah.

Evelyn You see, Cathy, at least Heather's trying. She's not sitting at home.

Cathy I'll pop out and find my own conspiracy theorist when I get back Mum, don't worry.

Evelyn But I do worry. I can't help it. I do. I don't want you to end up on your own and lonely.

Cathy I'm getting on fine.

Evelyn You're not as young as you used to be.

Cathy Thanks Mum.

Evelyn Some make-up would help, don't you think, Heather?

Cathy Mum!

Evelyn Make the most of yourself.

Cathy Leave me alone.

Evelyn You have to be practical. If you're going to find a nice man and settle down before it's too late to have children you have to get a move on.

Cathy I knew that was it.

Evelyn What?

Cathy It's not about me, is it, not about me being lonely, it's about you wanting grandchildren.

Evelyn It's for you, I want you to be fulfilled.

Cathy I'm not having kids just so you can swank off to your friends about your grandchildren.

Evelyn That's not it at all, you know it's not, I just want you to be happy.

Cathy I am happy – I'll do a little jig to prove it if you like.

Evelyn That won't be necessary.

Cathy Sure?

Evelyn It's funny how things turn out. Do you know, even the Braithwaite's have got grandchildren now and their kids were so peculiar I never thought they'd breed.

Cathy Listen to her! It's your problem Mum, you'll just have to deal with it.

Evelyn It is a problem. You don't seem to realise that. It can be very awkward. Whenever our friends come round they all pass round photos of their grandchildren and all I've got is a photo of the dog.

Cathy I tell you what, Mum, I'll get a photo of one of my friend's kids and you can show that around, pretend it's mine.

Evelyn Don't be ridiculous.

Cathy No, seriously, they'd never be any the wiser.

Evelyn I can't have an imaginary grandchild, people will think I've gone peculiar.

Cathy They might have a point, Mum.

[*Doorbell rings.*]

Evelyn Oh, that must be James!

[*Exit to answer door.*]

Cathy If I strangled her do you think I'd get off with manslaughter?

Heather [*Laughs.*]

Evelyn [*Voice off.*] James! I'm so relieved you're here.

James } [*Voice off.*] Sorry I'm late, got held up.

Cathy } Oh great, here comes golden bollocks.

Evelyn [*Voice off.*] I was worried sick, thought you might've had an accident.

James [*Voice off.*] Got held up at work, you know what it's like.

Evelyn [*Voice off.*] Yes, you're always so busy.

[*Evelyn and James enter.*]

I hope you drove carefully.

James Yes, Mother. Hi Cathy, Heather.

Heather } Hi.

Cathy } Hi.

James Nice balloon.

Evelyn Cathy sent it.

James Sagging a bit.

Cathy Oh fuck, it shouldn't do that.

Evelyn Language, Cathy.

Cathy Must have a leak. Even my balloon won't stay up.

James Perhaps it's the seal.

Evelyn It's the thought that counts, Cathy.

James It still looks very nice.

Evelyn Where's Susannah?

James Ah, I'm afraid she couldn't make it.

Evelyn Oh, what a shame.

James Yes, sorry.

Evelyn What happened?

James She got a bug. Nasty tummy. Can't move out of range of the toilet.
You know the kind of thing.

Evelyn Oh dear, I do hope she'll be all right on her own.

James Yes, I'm sure she'll be okay, not to worry.

Evelyn It's a pity she couldn't make it. We so rarely get to see her.

James Yes, well, just one of those things, I'm afraid.

Evelyn Yes, yes, of course, can't be helped.

James Where's Dad?

Evelyn He went out to the off-licence.

James Oh.

Evelyn I expect he'll be back soon.

James Good.

Evelyn Yes.
Well.
It's so lovely to have you all here.

Heather Yes.

Cathy Yeah.

James I'll just fetch the booze.
[Exit James.]

Heather Need any help?

James [voice off.] No, I'll be okay.

Cathy Susannah gets ill a lot, doesn't she Mum.

Evelyn Yes, poor girl. I don't think she eats properly. She's as thin as a rake,
isn't she Cathy. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she was on one of

those dangerous Hollywood diets.

Cathy Yeah, that'd be it.

James [*Enter James.*]

Here we are. Should be enough for the toasts.

[*James pushes the box onto the table. Cathy scoops up the glass bowl just in time to avoid it being pushed off the table.*]

Cathy Watch out!

James What, what?

Cathy You almost smashed Mum's favourite bowl.

Evelyn Well done Cathy.

James Oh, sorry Mum.

Evelyn No damage done.

James Didn't see it there.

Evelyn What a lot of stuff. Tom will be so pleased now the Champagne's here. He was getting a little anxious.

[*Beat.*]

It's so lovely to have everyone together.

Oh well, must get on. I still haven't sorted out the tables.

[*Exit Evelyn.*]

James [*James sits down at the kitchen table.*]

[*Sighs.*]

Cathy Couldn't persuade Susannah to come then.

James No.

Cathy She always manages to get out of things. Do you think she'd run a master-class for the rest of us?

James It's all right for her. She doesn't have to cope with the fall-out. All the hurt looks.

Cathy Yeah, Mum's good at that. Had a lot of practice.

James I tried to persuade her to come but we just ended up having another row. Can't say I feel much like a party myself.

Cathy Apparently neither does Mum. She says she's only doing it for Dad.

James Yeah, and I bet Dad thinks he's only doing it for her.

Heather You look done in, are you okay?

James It's been a stressful morning. But I'll cope.

Cathy Let's all have a drink.

Heather Good idea.

Cathy I know I could do with one.

Tom [*Enter Tom.*]

 James! Glad you could make it.

James Hi Dad.

Tom I was worried.

James Yeah, sorry, got held up.

Tom Thought you weren't coming.

James I had an important business meeting this morning. It went on a bit.

Tom How is business?

James Fine, fine.

 Turnover doubled this year.

Tom Excellent. Well done.

James Thanks, Dad.

Tom I just popped out for some emergency rations, just in case.

James Don't worry I've got the bubbly.

Tom Good. Good.

 [*Beat.*]

 That your car outside?

James Yes.

Tom Very nice.

James Thanks.

Tom Those new Jags are very stylish.

James Yes.

Tom Get many miles to the gallon?

James Not bad, especially on cruise control.

Tom It's the town driving that soaks up the juice.

James Yeah.

Tom Where's Susannah? In the garden?

James I'm afraid she couldn't make it.

Tom Not make it?

James Funny tummy. Couldn't be helped.

Cathy I can feel one coming on myself.

Tom Mother will be disappointed.

James She knows.

Tom Seems like ages since we last saw her.

James Can't be helped, Dad. Just one of those things.

Tom I can't remember the last time.

Cathy Nigel's funeral.

Tom Oh. Yes.

[*Awkward pause.*]

She isn't very healthy. Always seems to have something wrong with her. You want to get her checked out.

Cathy Dad. You make her sound like an old boiler.

Tom I just meant. There could be something underlying. Some underlying problem. Something you should get to the bottom of.

James I'm sure she'll be all right, Dad.

Tom Well, give her our love when you get home, won't you.

James Yes, of course.

Tom [*Beat.*]
Better unpack this lot.

James I'll do it.

Tom No, pass them to me and I'll put them in the chiller.

James Really, I can do it.

Tom No, no, no, quicker with two.

James Okay.
[*They unpack the bottles.*]

Tom I hope there's enough room.
[*Examines one of the bottles.*]
What's this?

James The bubbly.

Tom This isn't Champagne.

James It's very good stuff.

Tom You were supposed to bring Champagne.

James This stuff is very good. No one'll spot the difference.

Tom Of course they will.

James Not if we fill the glasses out here and bring it in on trays.
I've got a few real bottles to bring round for top ups.

Tom I wanted Champagne.

James No one will know, honest Dad.

Tom I'll know! I'll know it's fake.

James What does it matter? It's just something to -

Tom It matters to me.

James I'm a bit strapped for cash, it was all I could get.

Tom You should've let me know, I'd've given you the money.

James I didn't like to bother you -

Tom I'm disappointed James. I really am. I think you could've made an effort.

James An effort!

Tom Yes. After all it is a special occasion. And what happens? No Susannah and fake Champagne. You just don't bother, do you.

James Not bother?

Tom That's right. It wouldn't hurt for once to think about others instead of your self.

James Dad.

Tom Nigel wouldn't've done this. He always knew the right thing to do.

James Nigel isn't doing much these days, in case you hadn't noticed, on account of being dead.

Tom James, really, in front of Heather and everything.

James Oh God, I'm sorry Heather, I didn't mean . . .

Heather It's okay James.

Evelyn [*Enter Evelyn.*]
Everybody busy. That's what I like to see.
[*Inspecting the vol-au-vents.*]
Well done Heather, they look better now. I'll just pop them in the oven.
[*Puts vol-au-vents in the oven.*]

James It's made in a Champagne style.
At a blind tasting no one can tell the difference.

Tom Huh.

James Honest.

Evelyn Could you cut these rolls in half for me?

Heather Yes, of course.

Evelyn [*Observing Heather working.*]
 No dear, not like that. Cut them across.

Heather But this way people can -

Evelyn I prefer it this way. It looks neater.

Heather Okay.

Evelyn Thank you dear. Boys, leave that, I need you in the Marquee. We
 need to move some tables. I've decided what to do about the
 McNallys.
 [*Exit Evelyn, Tom and James.*]

Heather [*Hurls a bread roll across the kitchen.*]
 Now I can't cut a bread roll in half the right way!

Cathy No charge for the cookery lessons.

Heather I'm beginning to wonder how I coped so long doing everything wrong.

Cathy There's a right way, a wrong way, and then there's our way.
 Come on let's have a drink.

Heather I definitely need one now.
 [*Pause.*]
 Is she always so critical?

Cathy Pretty much. Now you know why I wasn't looking forward to coming.

Heather I had no idea she was so bossy.

Cathy You get used to it. The first twenty-five years are the worst.
 Here, have some of this.
 Hitting the bottle is the only way I can get through these occasions with
 my sanity remotely intact.

Heather Cheers.

Cathy Cheers.

Heather I'm beginning to see what you mean.

James [*Enter James.*]
Aha! Caught you two red-handed.

Cathy I thought you were helping with the tables.

James They started arguing about who was going to sit where so I thought I'd sneak off.

Cathy Drink?

James Now you're talking.
[*Cathy pours James a drink.*]
Heather, I'm sorry about my outburst earlier.

Heather That's okay, don't worry about it.

James I think the tension's beginning to get to me.

Cathy Join the rest of us.

James I wonder how they've lasted so long together. They argue about everything.

Cathy I'm past caring.

Heather Perhaps they enjoy it.

James Yes, perhaps.
What are you making?

Cathy One of my veggie specials.

James Anything I can do?

Cathy Could you chop up the celery and carrots? They're for dips.

James Okay.
Tell you what, I think we deserve something a little stronger than this stuff.

Cathy There isn't any.

James There is, if you know where to look. I know where Dad keeps his
secret stash.

Cathy Never.

James Yep.

[Rooting around in the back of a kitchen cupboard.]

 He hides it away so he doesn't have to offer anyone any of the good
stuff.

Cathy Typical.

James Here we are. Ten year old malt.

Cathy Wicked.

Heather Do you think we should?

Cathy *[James pours the whiskey into tea cups.]*

 Look, Heather, they only wanted us here so they could use us as
unpaid servants.

James I don't know why they didn't hire caterers. They'd be more reliable.

Cathy They want to test us.

Heather *[Drinking.]*

 Umm. Smooth.

James Cheers.

Cathy Cheers.

James It doesn't matter what you do. Nothing is ever good enough.

Cathy I thought it was only me who felt that way.

James Nope. I don't know why I keep trying.

Cathy We're programmed.

James Must be.

Cathy Like those Pavlov dogs.

James Yeah.

Heather Do you suppose everyone's family's like this?

Cathy I wouldn't know. I don't know everyone's family.

James What about yours?

Heather I didn't really have one. I was in care from the age of six.

Cathy God, I had no idea.

Heather It's not something I like to talk about. I was brought up in a series of foster homes and never felt part of any of them.

I suppose that's why I always thought your family was special. When I met Nigel it all seemed so cosy.

I thought, this is the way families are supposed to be.

Cathy You must be joking.

Heather I guess I had an idealistic view.

James Everything looks different from the outside.

Heather Yes, that must be it. Compared to my upbringing yours and Nigel's seemed so, happy, normal.

Cathy It's being so 'normal' that's warped us. We're so fucking busy being 'normal' we don't know how to be natural.

[Heather flips through Nigel's diary.]

James *[Imitating father.]* No standards, that's your problem.

Cathy *[Imitating mother.]* We did everything for them.

James *[Imitating father.]* And this is the thanks we get.

Cathy *[Imitating mother.]* I really think they could make an effort.

James } *[Imitating father.]* It wouldn't hurt them.

Cathy } *[Imitating mother.]* It wouldn't hurt them.

[Cathy and James subside into giggles.]

Heather Who's Aunt Rachel?

James Who?

Heather Aunt Rachel. He mentions her quite a bit. Here – visited Aunt Rachel again today.

James News to me.

Cathy We haven't got an Aunt Rachel.
Let's have a look.

Heather Look, here's another entry: Daddy and I visited Aunt Rachel today. Played with the big train set in the front room while Daddy and Aunt Rachel rested upstairs.

Cathy What!

James Fuck me.

Heather Here's another – Took another message to Aunt Rachel today. She has a nice smile. Gave me two pounds.

James And I thought he was just good at saving his pocket money.

Heather Is everybody thinking what I'm thinking?

James It all makes sense now. I think I might have met 'Aunt Rachel'.

Cathy What?

James Yeah.

Evelyn [*Enter Evelyn. They all start working again.*]
Ah, there you are.

James Ah Mum.
Settled the dispute?

Evelyn He's still fiddling with the seating. If he gets a hernia he only has himself to blame.
You look pale James. Doesn't he look pale Cathy?
I hope that Susannah is looking after you properly.

James I'm fine mother, really.

Evelyn He is pale though, isn't he?

James It's been a hectic day.

Evelyn Don't over-do things.

James *[Cuts himself with the knife.]*

 Ow!

Evelyn Oh James, what have you done?

James Bloody knife bit me.

Evelyn Let me look at it.

James It's all right.

Evelyn Come on, let me see.

James It's nothing.

Evelyn Don't be silly, show it to me. Oh dear, I'll get a plaster.

James I can get it myself.

Evelyn Don't be silly. I'll look after you.

James Stop fussing. I can look after myself.

Evelyn You'll bleed all over the floor.

James I'll be careful.

Evelyn I'm only trying to help.

James Well don't. I'm okay.

[Exit James.]

Evelyn Really James, I don't know what's got into you today.

[Beat.]

 Heather dear, would you make sure he's all right?

 The plasters are in the bathroom cabinet.

Heather Okay.

[Exit Heather.]

Evelyn What's wrong with James?

Cathy He's just a bit tense.

Evelyn I expect he's worrying about his speech.

Cathy Speech?

Evelyn Your father asked him to prepare one.

Cathy You are joking.

Evelyn I'm afraid not.

Cathy Are there any other 'surprises' I should know about?

Evelyn I don't think so.

Cathy Good.

Evelyn I must say your vegetarian thing smells delicious.

Cathy Thanks Mum.

Evelyn You always were so clever in the kitchen. You know what they say.

Cathy No, what?

Evelyn The way to a man's heart -

Cathy Is through his dick?

Evelyn Don't be crude, dear, it doesn't suit you.

[*Beat.*]

The Finlays are coming to the party.

Cathy That's nice.

Evelyn You remember the Finlays.

Cathy Sort of.

Evelyn I asked them to bring Ted along.

Cathy Ted?

Evelyn You remember Ted. Their son. You went to school with him.

He always liked you.

Cathy Ted?

Evelyn Yes, he was in the same class.

Cathy Hang on. Not that Ted.

Fat, glasses, had a stutter?

Evelyn He's lost a lot of weight lately.
You wouldn't recognise him now.

Cathy Mum, you're not trying to set me up?

Evelyn No. Of course not. I just thought . . . well, it would be nice for you to meet an old school chum.

Cathy Mum. Don't do this.

Evelyn I think he's got quite a good job. Designs wind-screen wipers for BMW. Highly technical stuff.

Cathy I don't care.

Evelyn He has to make sure they won't fly off at a hundred miles an hour.

Cathy Mother, stop.

Evelyn You might get along.

Cathy Mum, you're wasting your time.

Evelyn Don't be so pessimistic.

Cathy Mum, look, you know all those guys I used to go out with, and it never worked out.

Evelyn Don't worry, dear, you've just been unlucky.

Cathy No, listen, Mum, it wasn't them, it was me.

Evelyn Don't be silly. You should have more confidence.

Cathy Mum. Look. Oh hell. The truth is . . . I prefer women.

Evelyn What?

Cathy You know – sex.

Evelyn Sex?

Cathy I don't like men, I like women.

Evelyn Oh that.

Cathy What d'you mean, oh that.

Evelyn Don't worry, dear, it's just a phase we all go through.

Cathy [*Stunned silence.*]

Tom [*Enter Tom.*]

Where are the napkins?

Evelyn Top drawer, dear.

Tom [*Pulling out a vast armful of napkins.*]

Will these be enough?

Evelyn Yes, I think so.

[*Tom exits with napkins.*]

Cathy Just a phase?

Evelyn Yes, it's quite common. Don't worry about it.

Cathy Mum, I'm thirty-four, it is not a phase. I'm serious. I like women!

Evelyn There's no need to shout. I can hear perfectly well.

Cathy You can hear but you're not listening.

Evelyn Don't try to be clever Cathy. This is neither the time nor the place.

We'll discuss this later. And Cathy. I don't want you to mention this to your father. Let's not spoil his special day.

Oh, look at the time, we must get on.

[*Exit Evelyn.*]

Cathy [*Enter James and Heather.*]

I don't believe it.

Heather What?

Cathy Can you resign from a family? Because if so I'm going to hand in my notice.

James What's happened now?

Cathy I just came out to mother.

James Wow.

Heather And?

Cathy Nothing. Apparently it's just a phase.

James That's mum for you.

Heather Oh well, at least it didn't freak her out.

Cathy No. But it's freaked me out.

 I feel like I don't exist.

James Mother has always been expert at denying the existence of anything she doesn't like.

Cathy Thanks a lot.

James I didn't mean you. I just meant she's a master of double-thought. She managed to deny that Dad was having an affair.

Cathy Who'd have him?

Heather Aunt Rachel?

James Exactly.

Cathy Perhaps Nigel was making it up.

James No. Now I think about it I'm sure I saw him with her.

Cathy When? What did you see?

James I was just a little kid at the time. He took me to the dentist. I remember it because he didn't normally do stuff like that. When I came out she was in the car. I saw them kissing and when they saw me they sprang apart.

Cathy } [Gasps.]

Heather } [Gasps.]

Cathy I don't believe it.

James Dad bought me lots of sweets later.

 You remember Bruno?

Cathy Course.

Heather Bruno?

Cathy Our dog.

Heather Oh.

Cathy He was lovely.

James He bit her.

Heather Who bit who?

James Bruno bit the other woman.

Cathy Good for Bruno.

James Yeah, but remember what happened to Bruno.

Cathy He got sick.

James Did he?

Cathy That's why he had to be . . .

James That's what Dad told us.

Cathy No. James, you're not saying . . .

James [*Shrugs.*]
Funny coincidence isn't it. Bruno bites mistress then he makes a one-way trip to the vets.

Cathy I feel sick.

James Dad had a nasty temper. I wouldn't put it past him.
Do you remember those terrible rages he used to get into?

Cathy Oh yeah.

James Sometimes you felt like you had to walk around the house on tiptoe in case you set him off.

Cathy Mum said it was drinking whiskey that made him aggressive.

Heather Nigel never mentioned anything about this.

James Well, he wouldn't, would he.

Evelyn [*Voice off.*]

Cathy! Can you please come and give me a hand.

Cathy Oh God, what now.

[Exit Cathy.]

James And another thing –

[His mobile phone rings.]

[to Heather.] Excuse me.

[Answers phone.]

Hello?

Hi, Pete, how's it going?

Yes.

Couldn't be better.

What?

You have to be –

You know I've already gone as low as I –

Yes.

I know, yes.

But I thought we'd agreed –

Look Pete I really need this contract.

I know.

You have to give me a break.

What about all the times I helped you?

Look, just give me –

Hello?

Hello?

Shit.

Heather What is it?

James Oh shit.

Heather James?

James Just when you think things can't get worse.
[Puts his head in his hands.]

Heather Is it bad news?

James I'm finished.

Heather What?

James I've lost the fucking contract. I was depending on that to keep the business afloat.

Heather Oh no, I'm so sorry.

James I have what they call a liquidity crisis. I'm drowning in debt.
Do you know, I'm a rich man, when it comes to bad debts. If people paid me what they owe me I could pay other people what I owe them, we'd all be happy passing the money around, that's what capitalism is about for Christ's sake! But no, someone always thinks they'll be better off by not paying.

Heather Perhaps there's still time.

James No. It's over. They'll pull the plug now. I have to face it.
I
am not
a
success.
There, I've said it.
All my life I've been struggling against it.
But here it is.
Failure.
I've been pretending to be successful for years, and I thought if I kept up the pretence for long enough everyone would believe me and then

it'd be true.

It worked for a while.

Heather Don't be too hard on yourself.

James I'm just being honest – for once.

You see, a long time ago, I thought I'd figured out the knack of getting through life was to pretend that everything is okay.

Skate across life, keep on going, don't look down, don't think about what's under the ice.

But I'm running out of stamina, I'm slowing down, and I can hear the ice cracking all around me.

Heather It's scary, facing up to things we've been avoiding, but sometimes it can be a release too.

James It's funny.

I was always competing with Nigel.

But I could never keep up.

Not with him.

He was always ahead of me.

Smart at school. Brilliant career as a surgeon. He married you, whereas I married Susannah, the brittlest woman in Britain.

Heather Don't James.

James I've always been second-rate.

Heather You mustn't say that.

James But it's true.

Heather Nigel wasn't so perfect.

James No?

Heather No.

You're too hard on yourself.

It seems to run in the family. You're all trying to be -

James Something we're not.

Heather Too perfect.

 Nigel was the same.

 He had to excel at everything, even things that didn't matter.

 But no one's good at everything.

James Except Nigel.

Heather Don't fall into the same trap.

 It is a trap.

James I'm dead in the water.

Heather But you're not dead.

 Nigel is.

 God, I can say that now without bursting into tears.

James I'm sorry, I shouldn't've burdened you with my problems.

 You have enough of your own.

Heather James.

 When I came here. Today. I was going to. I wanted to break things.

 Shatter. I wanted to wake everyone up.

James They could do with a wake-up call.

Heather Then I thought - isn't there enough hurt?

 But I still wanted to . . . I don't know . . . share it around.

 But then I thought - why do that? What's the point? Don't we all live

 by the art of deceit?

James What is it Heather?

Heather I'm sure Nigel killed himself.

James What!

Heather And I'm telling you because you need to know. You think you've failed;

but it was being perfect that killed Nigel.

James But the inquest, they said -

Heather What is convenient.

I don't think he fell asleep at the wheel. He meant to drive into that tree. He wasn't wearing his seat belt and he always did, he always did.

He wanted to die.

James But why? He had everything.

Heather He was being investigated.

At the hospital.

James What kind of investigation?

Heather Mistakes in the operating theatre.

Patients had died.

Nigel said they were all high-risk cases but not everyone agreed.

James I had no idea.

Heather He didn't want anyone to know.

The last few weeks before the 'accident' were a nightmare for both of us.

He wasn't sleeping. He was irritable all the time.

I knew he was worried, I suppose I just didn't realise how much.

I did try to help him, but he pushed me away. He had to pretend everything was okay, right up to the end, but it wasn't and we both knew it.

[*Beat.*]

And now he's dead.

In the weeks after his death I felt so low, so lost and alone. And I'd go for long drives and I suddenly realised, this is it, all this power just

beneath my foot, and I'd gaze hard out the windscreen and think, just one turn of the wheel, foot down, and I could end it all. Then I knew that must be how Nigel felt that day. So easy, just to seize that passing thought and act on it, not think, not hesitate; just do it. So you see, I knew from inside what happened, and I can see how it made sense for a moment but I'm still angry with him. I want to march up to the pearly gates and slap him in the face. Slap him, and kiss him, and hug him to me.

But [*beat*] instead I'm here, in the kitchen, with the vol-au-vents and [*flipping Nigel's diary.*] a pathetic scrap of history, and arguments with the dead.

Tom [*Enter Tom, Evelyn and Cathy.*]

Come on you two, no slacking, time's running out.

James [*Silence.*]

Heather [*Silence.*]

Tom Did you hear me?

James Yes, Dad, yes.

Evelyn Look at the time. The guests will be arriving soon.

Tom There's always some idiot who turns up too early.

James Yes, Dad.

Evelyn Cathy, help me get the fruit-salad ready.

Cathy Okay, mum.

Tom Now, don't forget James, as soon as they've finished eating you get up and make the toast.

James Yes, Dad.

Tom Got your speech ready?

James The speech?

Tom Yes, yes, the speech.

James Damn, I've left it in my other jacket.

Tom What!

James Don't worry, I can remember the gist.

Tom Really, it's not good enough James, it really isn't.

Cathy Improvised is often better.

Tom No it is not. This is going to be a disaster.

Evelyn Now calm down dear.

Tom How could you forget your speech?

James I've had a lot on my mind lately.

Tom Always excuses. If Nigel were here this wouldn't have happened.

James I don't believe it. My life is collapsing around my ears and all you care about is whether I've remembered my speech in praise of you!
You're like one of those bad Roman emperors.

Evelyn Now then, James, don't talk to your father like that.

Tom What's he going on about Roman Emperors for?

James What's the use?

Heather James is upset.
He's had some bad news.

Evelyn What is it dear?

Tom Yes, come out with it.

James I'm broke.

Tom What?

James Want to know why I was late? Not because of road-works on the M40.
Or a faulty alarm clock. No. I spent the morning grovelling trying to save my business but it looks like I'm going to lose it anyway.

Evelyn Oh no.

James Yes.

Tom I had no idea.

James Like the car do you, Dad?
Impressed.
Well don't be. It's not mine. It's leased and when I can't keep up the payments they'll be around to repossess it.

Tom I never knew. Why didn't you tell us you were having money problems?

James I could never tell you anything.

Tom Of course you can. We're always here for you.

James No.

Evelyn I think we should all have a cup of tea.

James I could never tell you anything, not anything important, especially bad news.
Failing.

Tom Well, this is a right mess.

James Who are we fooling? It's always been a mess.

Evelyn Now then, calm down, James. I'm sure we can sort it all out later, you don't want to spoil the party, do you.

James Your party. Forty blissful years. That's a joke, isn't it.

Evelyn Now then, James.

James No, I won't shut up!
Let's be honest for once.

Tom What are you talking about?

James We all know you two've never been happy together.

Evelyn Don't be silly, James. Of course we're happy, we're very very happy, aren't we dear.

Tom Yes, dear.

Evelyn See.

James You don't have to act in front of me.
I was there! I know! I'm not blind.

Tom Are you drunk?

Evelyn James, I think your imagination has got out of control.

James Are you going to rewrite the past?

Tom What are you talking about?

James Because you can't. We were there too. It's our past too.

Evelyn Cathy, do you have any idea what he is going on about?

James Don't act ignorant Mum. You were always complaining to us about how impossible Dad was to live with.

Tom Evelyn!

Evelyn He's making it all up.

James As soon as you were out the door it was, oh I'm so hard done by, he's so unreasonable, I don't know how I can cope.

Evelyn Honestly Tom, I never said any such thing.

James [*to Tom.*] And you were only too glad to get out of the house. Get away from her, and us. I suppose you were anxious to see your lover.

Evelyn } What!

Tom } Ridiculous!

James Don't act surprised Mum, you knew all along. I suppose you were glad to get a rest from him.

Evelyn It's not true.

James Dad was philandering for years and you turned a blind eye, pretending it wasn't happening, while at the same time you both accused the rest of us of lacking moral standards.

Tom Preposterous. The trouble with you is you don't know what's important and what's not.

Cathy You murdered Bruno!

Tom What?

Cathy You know.

Tom Has everybody gone mad?

James Why can't we be honest about our lives? We've been pretending for so long we don't know what's real and what isn't. I'm tired of pretending.

Tom You're tired, I'm tired, we're all tired. But you're still my son and you'll show me some respect.

James The only son you ever cared about was Nigel!

Evelyn We love you all equally.

James I grew up sick of hearing how good he was at everything. Nigel this, Nigel that, why can't you be more like Nigel, no praise for me.

Tom Do something praiseworthy and you'll get praise.

James Yes, it's always our fault isn't it. We're such a disappointment. You're so parsimonious with your love anyone would think it was made of gold.

Evelyn [*Starts to cry.*]

Tom Pay no attention dear.

James Oh here it comes, the tactical tears.

Tom Don't talk to your mother like that, can't you see she's upset?

James You always fell for it Dad, didn't you, and you still do.

Tom Nigel would certainly not speak to us like this.

James No, he wouldn't, because he's never going to speak to you again.

He's dead.

But we're alive. We're here but you don't see us.

Tom This is very hurtful.

James We're all hurt.

Tom You're upset so you want to make us upset.

Cathy I'm upset too.

Tom [to James.] Don't you think we have feelings? God knows we tried our best, I'm sorry our best wasn't good enough for you, but it wasn't easy. You expect us to be perfect, holding us up to some impossible standard of judgement. But I've got news for you. Your parents are just human too, like everyone else, but we love one another in our own way, it may not be your way, but it's ours.

Perhaps you can do better. I hope you can.

Wait till you have children. All I can say is, I hope they don't do the same thing to you on your fortieth anniversary.

James There won't be any fortieth, there won't be any children and there won't be any anniversary.

Do you seriously expect Susannah will stay around for long when she realises I'm broke!

Evelyn [to Cathy.] I never liked her.

Tom Why pick today of all days? What has got into you?

James I just can't take the hypocrisy any more.

Heather Perhaps we should all calm down, take a deep breath.

Evelyn It makes you wonder why you had children in the first place.

Tom [to Evelyn.] Evelyn!

[to James.] There isn't time for all this arguing, people will be arriving any minute.

James Yes, mustn't be shown up in front of your friends, that's all you care about!

Evelyn Oh dear, oh dear, I must get this ready.

Cathy No, I'll do it Mum.
[*Cathy and Evelyn struggle over possession of the cut glass bowl.*]

Evelyn I'll do it.

Cathy No, let me.

Evelyn No, no, no.

Cathy Let go - you'll break it.

Evelyn [*Evelyn lets go and subsides into tears.*]

Tom [*to James.*] See what you've done.

James I suppose none of it has anything to do with you?

Tom If only Nigel was here none of this would've happened.

James Nigel? Let me tell you something about your precious Nigel -

Heather James! It's good to get things out in the open but I think you've said enough.
[*to everyone.*] When people have got a family they take it for granted. I never had a family – not a real one. But this one is real, and it has faults, like everything.
None of us are perfect, are we, but that doesn't mean we haven't got a lot to give one another.
At the end of the day all we have are each other. We mustn't forget that.

James I'm sorry, I just . . .

Tom I think we'll skip the speeches.

Heather [*Sound of car pulling up outside, doors closing etc.*]
Good idea.

Cathy Is that a car?

Heather Good. We're almost ready, aren't we.

Cathy Yes.

James Yes.

Tom Evelyn, are you all right?

Evelyn Yes, dear, thank you.

Cathy [*Doorbell rings.*]
Let's face the music then.

Heather I'll get the door.
The rest of you finish laying out the food.
James, open the wine.
[*Exit Heather. Tom follows her into the hallway.*]

Evelyn [*Cathy peers into the hallway.*]
Who is it Cathy?

Cathy It's the Murdochs.

Evelyn Oh, that's nice.

Tom [*Voice off.*] Hello Tony, Julie, you've met Heather, haven't you.

Evelyn How do I look? Are my eyes all red?

Cathy You look fine, Mum.

James Mum, I . . .

Evelyn I'm okay, give me a hug.
[*They embrace.*]
That's my boy.

Cathy That Tony Murdoch always fancied you didn't he.

Evelyn Don't be silly.

Cathy Maybe you should get off with him at the party.

Evelyn [*Gives Cathy a knowing look, as if to say, maybe I already have.*]

Tony Murdoch. . .

Cathy dear, I don't believe in repeating myself.

Cathy [Stunned silence.]

James [Stunned silence.]

Evelyn C'mon – let the party begin.

[They all exit. The glass bowl sits on the table reflecting light.]

END