

# *IF AT FIRST ...*

An original stage play by

MICHAEL JOHNSTON

Version 3 © 2012

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## CHARACTERS

The older RICHARD

The older CAROLINE

RICHARD

CAROLINE

The younger RICHARD

The younger CAROLINE

ACT ONE

*The stage has three zones. Upstage left is Richard's 'space'; upstage right is Caroline's. Depending on the year in which each scene takes place, the actors are plus or minus sixty, forty and twenty. The stage directions make this clear. Downstage centre starts off as the stalls of a West End theatre.*

*The year is 2008. [Music: An actor's life for me from Pinocchio.] Caroline enters, carrying a clipboard, wearing a television talkback earpiece, speaking on her mobile and heading for the two rows of seats where she sits down in the second row.*

CAROLINE: Yes, I'm here; ready and waiting ... Tell him Mrs Roth is waiting for him in the stalls and we're going straight into the interview ... *(To the invisible camera)* How's this for level? For breakfast this morning I had half a pink grapefruit ... fine, thank you Rupert. Are the microphones out of sight of every camera? ... Are you happy Rupert? ... Fine.

*She puts her clipboard on the rear middle seat and is looking towards Richard as he enters.*

CAROLINE: Good morning, Richard, and welcome to Roth Productions first major interview.

RICHARD: Well, I'm damned; Caroline Carey!

CAROLINE: In my current incarnation, Caroline Roth, but I've had other names on the way. How are you, Richard?

RICHARD: Flabbergasted. Was this *your* idea?

CAROLINE: To delay letting you know who I was until you were here, yes. Doing a piece on you seemed too important to risk your deciding you didn't want to do this with *me*. You still have that option but now you're here I hope you'll stay. We can get straight down to it.

RICHARD: You've come a long way.

CAROLINE: Shall we sit down and talk. You on the end there please and I'll be here. Now, first of all, can you tell me what you had for breakfast?

RICHARD: What's that got to do with anything, or are you trying to lull me into a false sense of security?

CAROLINE: No; just checking for level, and I think we've done that now. Okay, Rupert? ... Right! Light's please and start recording.  
(*To Richard*) Are you ready to pitch right in?

RICHARD: As long as this interview is about my work and not my personal life.

CAROLINE: On camera and in front of witnesses, you have that assurance.

RICHARD: You could have knocked me down with the proverbial!

CAROLINE: Now who's risking talking about personal matters?

RICHARD: Touché!

CAROLINE: Then let's go in ten. Count me in please, Rupert.  
(*Pause. Her voice now goes down and she speaks more clearly.*)

Richard Morrison: over the past twenty or more years, you've acquired something of a reputation as a playwright with a highly developed social conscience. Your *earlier* work is said to be drawn largely from your own experiences but, from around the nineties, you seemed to switch focus to more political areas and themes. One thinks of *Suffer the Children* which deals with the way in which the Catholic Church failed to respond to widespread allegations of child molestation. Was this a conscious change of direction?

RICHARD: In a sense. I believe that everyone *wants* to confront social issues in public life but that they often need the metaphors of a theatre play to allow them to express their inner feelings vicariously, watching the roles played out on stage rather than facing up to them out on the street. I began to feel television *and* the stage were reining back on documentary exposés and there was, what shall I say, a gap in the market. What *I* wanted to do was take these conflicts and shape them into a dramatic unity which would lead audiences to a confrontation with an issue by rubbing their noses in it.

CAROLINE: But do these plays reflect your *own* position on the issues?

RICHARD: Not necessarily. If people think they can read *me* just from reading my plays I will have failed. If you really want to understand *me*; or get under the skin of my *plays*; then you need to study the context.

CAROLINE: That context being ...?

RICHARD: Real life, life as it's happening all around us, and which we are reacting to all the time.

CAROLINE: Then couldn't it be argued that you're drawing just as much from your personal experiences, in your plays on social issues as you were, for example, in your plays about university life in the 1960s?

RICHARD: Fair point! Perhaps I'll concede that, in part. We're all the sum of our accumulated experiences, and when I wrote *Campus* my range of experience was narrower and so the extent to which it drew on seemingly autobiographical material was greater. Now I've changed gear; moved, you might say, into the third or fourth stages of man. My earlier plays were written by a lover; (*Caroline very obviously raises her eyebrows at this*) the later plays by a soldier; which is why they're "full of strange oaths", and why the characters are "jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel" which, from my point of view, creates the right dramatic impact.

CAROLINE: If your early plays reflect your being very much in love (*Richard raises a warning hand*) – in love with *life* I mean – and finding everything wonderful; and you've just said the work that followed reflects the argumentative, easily provoked soldier going into battle for a cause; how are we to view your current project, a modern reworking of the Figaro plays by Beaumarchais? Do you have a "fair round belly", discreetly hidden from our cameras by the seat in front of you, "lined with good capons", and are your three *new* plays "full of wise saws"?

RICHARD: I'd forgotten how well you know your Shakespeare and, yes, you might even have another point. In my seventh decade I find it harder to write as if I were in my twenties or forties. That's not to say it can't be done. The much misquoted Wordsworth didn't just define poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. If one reads the Preface carefully, what he describes is the process of recollecting earlier emotions with a view to *recreating* them: recreating them so that everyone reading his verse ought to be able to feel the raw emotion that first inspired it. Does it work? As the French say, in practise it works, even if, in theory, it's impossible.

CAROLINE: Let me pick up on that French allusion then and take you on to your reworking of the Figaro plays. Have you worked all the anger out of your system now?

RICHARD: I hope not. But I've grown tired of writing from that point of view and, as I was casting around for my next project, I came on a copy of the three Figaro plays.

CAROLINE: You say three, but most of us only know two.

RICHARD: You're right: *Barber of Seville* and *Marriage of Figaro* and even that's really only thanks to Rossini and Mozart. Anyway, Beaumarchais didn't *set out* to write a trilogy. It was the success of

*Barber* that got his creative juices flowing and, after *Marriage*, he started wondering how some of the characters would interact if they met up again after a gap of twenty-five years. The result was *The Guilty Mother* and, as *he* wrote it, the characters are engulfed by their emotions and come close to destruction.

CAROLINE: Since that's the one we're least familiar with, let's take a look now at a brief scene from your modern reconstruction where the character, based on the Count, is confronting his wife about their son; a child born of her extra-marital affair many years earlier. Being a twentieth-century woman, she retaliates by reminding him of his own illegitimate child ... (*To camera*) Cut please Rupert ... Richard, we filmed the scene earlier today; it seemed the right one to me.

RICHARD: Fine.

CAROLINE: Where I'd like to go next is the future. I'll be asking you to give viewers some tantalising hints of what's in your creative in-tray. Is that all right?

RICHARD: Probably.

CAROLINE: Okay, Rupert; I'm ready. Count me in. (*Ten second pause.*) Richard Morrison, you've produced a significant quantity of innovative theatre and your latest work is up and running at the Falstaff. Is it possible you've already begun work on your next play? Where will your creative imagination take you next?

RICHARD: A good question; but hard to answer. From time to time, my imagination leads me astray but I don't always realise it until I've spent – I'd never say wasted – days, months pursuing ideas that are fast disappearing over the horizon; but lately I've been reading for pleasure; or at least trying to.

CAROLINE: Explain what you mean by *trying* to read for pleasure. Isn't reading generally pleasurable?

RICHARD: Almost invariably; but what happens to me, I'm afraid, is I seldom get past page 10 before I'm starting to wonder how the book might be dramatised, and that can get in the way of simple enjoyment.

CAROLINE: Do go on.

RICHARD: Well. I've been reading Jonathan Coe's biography of B S Johnson who had this theory about writing nothing but the truth. That would put a lot of us out of business but it prompted me to get hold of one of his books; the one he published not bound, but in a box. There are twenty-seven sections and, apart from the first and the last, they can be read in any order you like. I believe I could devise a *play* in which the opening scene would set up the back story and the

characters, but all the other scenes could be played in a different order at every performance. Even if there were only five movable scenes, that's one hundred and twenty possible versions.

CAROLINE: A twenty week run; if you had six performances a week!

RICHARD: Mathematically correct; and, you know, I've just had another thought! It would really stretch the actors if they didn't know the running order until curtain up and, even tougher, if they had to ad lib the final scene depending on how the earlier scenes had been played. Then *every* performance would be a world première.

CAROLINE: You certainly believe in making actors work for their money!

RICHARD: Yes, but the challenge would be to create a real drama, something that would generate internal conflicts that need to be addressed and, at least in part, resolved, by the end of the play.

CAROLINE: So when might we see the first of these hundreds of premières?

RICHARD: Who knows! I can already hear the sound of running feet as producers flee from the idea. I might have to have my own theatre and put my mouth where my money once was!

CAROLINE: Well, I for one would buy a ticket. (*Pause and she turns to address a different camera.*) Richard Morrison's three *Fitzgerald* plays are now playing, at the Falstaff Theatre off Shaftesbury Avenue, here in London. (*Turning back to Richard.*) Thank you, Richard.

RICHARD: Thank you, Caroline.

CAROLINE: That's it, Rupert. I don't want anyone editing a single frame of that before I've seen it myself.

*The two shift into a more relaxed and intimate mood.*

RICHARD: I think I've just gone and created a rod for my back. I let my tongue run away with me there.

CAROLINE: Not at all! You were a wonderful interviewee.

RICHARD: Thanks: (*beat*) look, now that we *have* met again, can we continue a more personal conversation, tonight say, over a meal?

CAROLINE: I'd love to, I want to; but it will have to be at my place if that's all right. I'm expecting an important call from the States and

I need to be where I have all the facts and figures. My address is on my card. Is eight all right?

RICHARD: Just perfect.

CAROLINE: I'll see you then.

*Both rise and come round the front of the seats. They seem about to air-kiss but, at the last minute it becomes a hug. Then Caroline exits quickly. Richard remains for a moment. As he takes out and switches on his mobile, it bleeps. He reads the message.*

RICHARD: ... "Please call Detective Superintendent Oates at the Serious Fraud Office as soon as possible." Bloody Hell! My own frauds have been such peccadilloes I only need one guess what this is about. (*He dials a number.*) ... Hello, this is Richard Morrison. Superintendent Oates asked me to call ... My goodness, in my young day people of your rank didn't answer their own phones. How can I help you? (*Quite a long pause with several grunts of acknowledgement from Richard.*) Listen Superintendent, I know I was a gullible fool but he *seemed* very trustworthy. So, when my writing life got very busy, I left him to it. My job was to write in order to earn the money, and his was to look after the money so I could write. (*Pause*) Yes, I lost a great deal of money, literally millions, but it was my own damned fault. (*Pause*) But I don't *want* to press charges. (*Pause*) What do you mean "out of my hands"? (*Pause*) *What!* You can *compel* me to give evidence! Are you serious? (*Pause*) All right then, you *are* serious ... Right, right; I'll cancel my appointments for tomorrow morning in the fond hope I can be left to get on with my *own* life afterwards ... Thank you. Goodbye. Jee-zus, Hamish, I need you. (*He dials a number. Brief pause.*) This is Richard Morrison; put me through to Mr McTavish, please ... I don't care if he's got the Poet Laureate in with him. I need him *now!* ... Hamish, I need to see you; it's a crisis! Scotland Yard ... You too! Bloody Hell ... Yes, all right, all right, I'll go home and take a couple now and have a quick lie down but I have to go out this evening. I'm having dinner with an old flame ... Right in one. Sometimes I think *you* should be the writer; but I would make a lousy agent ... And you too, my old Macturtle dove. Thanks again.

*[From time to time in later scenes, speeches overlap. An asterisk (\*) will indicate when the next speech should actually begin.]*

*It's Spring 1988. Richard, early forties; is asleep on his sofa. A whisky bottle and glass, both empty, lie on the floor beside him. Caroline, not yet forty, is less well-dressed and the room in which she is trying to type is untidy. Her old-fashioned phone rings. She has to find it under some of the clutter on her table. She is clearly under stress.*

CAROLINE: Hold on a moment!

*She types another line and rips the paper out of the typewriter.*

CAROLINE: Yes? ... *Mother!* What is it this time? ... No! Three times no! I do not want to meet yet another of your eligible lechers who just happens to have been invited to dinner the same night as me. You have no subtlety. Even the bit players are the same every time; Mildred, Harold, the Smith twins. Do you have them on contract? ... Of course I'm being rude and offensive, and with good reason. I'll organise my own sex life, if you don't mind ... And basically I suppose I still love *you*, but let's be clear about this, you and Daddy are to blame ... yes *blame*; blame for my marriage failing because you foisted him on to me. You stampeded me into a supposedly respectable marriage because *you* wanted me married off (*Richard's Trimphone starts chirping*) ... Well I'm sorry, I *am* in 'that kind of mood again' so hurry off to your coffee morning to raise money for the party and that bloody woman, and let *me* hurry off to get indigestion so that I can write another of my famously dyspeptic restaurant reviews.

*Caroline slams the phone down. As Richard reaches out for his phone, it stops ringing and his answering machine, in a very smooth voice, says, "This is Richard Morrison". The caller hangs up.*

RICHARD: Bugger and shit! I need Alka-Seltzer!

*He exits left. Meanwhile, Caroline starts putting on her coat and switching on and testing her answering machine.*

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello! This is Caroline Carey. I'm unable to talk to you right now so please leave a message after the tone *not forgetting* your name and phone number and I will contact you as soon as I can.

CAROLINE: That's telling them. But if it's my mother, don't even bother to record the message!

*Caroline exits; Richard returns. His phone starts ringing again. This time he is able to pick it up.*

RICHARD: This is Richard Morrison ... (*He jerks the phone away from his ear.*) You stupid haggis! I always talk like this when I answer the phone because there's just a chance that my caller is someone of taste and discernment and not my literary agent. *That's* why I sound 'just like my answering machine'. (*More calmly, and putting the phone to his ear.*) Now then Hamish, what is it you want this time? (*Long pause.*) No! ... What do you mean *why*? Yours not to reason why: yours but to *do*: Och aye! (*Make it a play on Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade.*) You're my *agent*, not my

employer and if I don't want to become playwright-in-residence in some cultural backwater then your job is to let them down as gently as possible ... I'll tell you what's biting me. It's who, rather than what. My bloody wife is biting me, where it hurts. She's seen a photograph in *Variety* of me and Karen at the first night party and has unerringly spotted we've been having it off ... I don't know *how* she does it. Suffice to say when she called I was unable to *lie* convincingly enough ... True, but *her* extra-marital activities are for business reasons and therefore none of *my* business whereas my one, single, only, unique fling has flung me beyond the pale ... All right then, my second only unique fling and yes the first one *was* with the leading lady in my first West End play. I'm a creature of habit. (*Pause*) Now, Hamish, that's a cliché you haven't used for at least a week, but I don't *want* to be hanged yet, whether for a sheep, or even two little lambkins. It's over with Karen anyway ... All right, all right but, for the moment, just leave me in peace! ... Hamish you're a brick; or at least it rhymes with brick ... And to you, goodbye. (*He hangs up.*)

*He picks up the empty bottle, up-ends it into his mouth and puts it on his desk. He picks up his Filofax and leafs through it. Caroline's phone starts ringing.*

RICHARD: There ought to be some way of arranging Filofax pages in the order of 'most referred to', or 'most useful in a crisis'. I mean \*alphabetical seems too literal.

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello! This is Caroline Carey. I'm unable to talk to you right now so please leave a message after the tone *not forgetting* your name and phone number and I will contact you as soon as I can.

*The message is followed by the tone and then the sound of a phone being put down. Caroline's phone rings again, four times.*

RICHARD: ... I know! I'll put my problems on the agenda for my next improvisation workshop. I can say they're not *my* problems \*but a friend's. They won't believe me but you never know I might hear something useful.

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello! This is Caroline Carey. I'm unable to talk to you right now so please leave a message after the tone *not forgetting* your name and phone number\* and I will contact you as soon as I can. (*The caller hangs up.*)

RICHARD: Oh, what the hell! It's "be-nice-to-your-agent" week. (*He dials a number then waits for a reply.*) Ah Hamish! I'm glad I caught you. Sorry I was so grumpy. With all my troubles I can't seem to get off the bit, writing-wise; please feel free to suggest something useful to do in the circumstances. (*Pause*) Oh dear me! You *have* got a one-track mind, not to mention a vested interest; but it

strikes a chord. What you're saying is this poor, down-trodden playwright should pour his heart out in a new play about how the hero's actress wife took him to the cleaners ... Okay, okay; I hear you. You mean well. I'll start tomorrow ... What do you mean, "Why tomorrow?" *Caroline's phone starts to ring.*) ... Because I have things to *do* today, but since you insist, I'll put the bottle back in the kitchen and not have another drink until I've written the synopsis ... \*Yes, thanks Hamish, I'll speak to you tomorrow ... you too, goodbye. *(He hangs up and now frantically looks through his Filofax.)*

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello! This is Caroline Carey. I'm unable to talk to you right now so please leave a message after the tone *including* your name and phone number and I will contact you as soon as I can. *(The caller hangs up.)*

RICHARD (*declaiming*): "For thus it stands with me: Albert, my father, is deceased, as is Miriam my mother, and I have thrust myself into this Filofax happily to swive and thrive as best I may. Crowns in my purse I have, until my divorce takes half of them, and goods here at home" (*himself again*) and she's not getting her hands on *this* place even if I have to part with everything else. *(He is leafing through his Filofax.)* Andrew, Jean, Shirley – ah, Shirley – Duncan, Janine, June, Bruce, and who do we have *here!* Caroline! She'll never be there *now.* *(Sings)* I wonder who's kissing her now ... You know what; I'll give them a call and find out the latest gossip. *(He dials a number. He hums a tune as he waits.)* Hello, good evening. Is that Mrs Carey? ... Richard Morrison here, the playwright ... I write plays ... How is Mr Carey? ... Oh dear, I am *truly* sorry? ... No ... Yes, Big Bang ... No! Oh, that is truly tragic, Mrs Carey ... In fact it *was* Caroline I was hoping to ... we were quite close once ... Well, we were much younger, not that I'm offering that as an excuse ... Is she really? I'm sorry to hear that ... So what is she doing nowadays? ... Well, if you're absolutely sure she won't mind ... I have a pen here ... I've got that, thank you. Well, all the best and it would be *lovely* to see you again ... You're very kind ... Goodbye to you too ... Well, fancy that.

*He dials a phone number. Caroline's phone rings and after four rings goes into its message.*

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE: Hello! This is Caroline Carey. I'm unable to talk to you right now so please leave a message after the tone *not forgetting* your name and phone number and I will contact you as soon as I can.

RICHARD: Hello Caroline, you probably weren't expecting to hear from me but this is Richard Morrison. How are you? I'm well enough but, for both of us I'm sure, life has had its ups and downs.

*The stage lights dim. Richard exits. [There is a short musical bridge; e.g. Spike Jones Cocktails for Two]. As the lights come up, Caroline*

*enters her flat and throws her coat on a chair. She sees that the answering machine light is flashing and heads towards it.*

CAROLINE: I hope it's not you, Mummy, because I'm ready enough to puke as it is. Who have you dredged up this time?

CAROLINE'S ANSWERING MACHINE (*Richard's voice*): Hello Caroline, you probably weren't expecting to hear from me but this is Richard Morrison. \*How are you ...?

CAROLINE: Bloody hell!

CAROLINE'S ANS M/C (*Richard's voice*): ... I'm well enough but, for both of us I'm sure, life has had its ups and downs. Listen, I apologise up front for calling your mother first but the only number I had for you was for your parents' so I took a chance. I sometimes see your restaurant reviews and maybe you've been to one of my plays but it seems we're both in London so how would you feel about meeting up again, over a meal if you like. My number is 01-555-1212 but I'll call again later if I may. Meantime, all the very best.

CAROLINE: Well, I'm damned; the cheek of it! My once-dear Dickey Bird, you *want* something?

*Richard enters his living room and dials a number on his phone. Caroline's phone rings and she grabs it quickly.*

CAROLINE: Mother, butt out of this and don't you *dare* invite him for dinner! Do you\* understand ...?

RICHARD: ... Caroline? It's Richard. Are\* you all right?

CAROLINE: Richard! Oh my God, I'm sorry. I thought it was my mother.

RICHARD: Not this time. Look, I'm sorry about that. I should have tried to contact you through one of the papers.

CAROLINE: Apology accepted; but what's prompted this sudden urge?

RICHARD: The plain truth is I really want someone to talk to and no one else seemed appealing. The theatre world can be very shallow. We're all so afraid of giving accidental offence. Then I saw your name in my Filofax, and it just gave off the right vibes.

CAROLINE: I'm a journalist, not a psychotherapist. But I seem to remember we both spent too much time playacting.

RICHARD: Well, I'm offering you a walk-on part in my next production: 'Lunch for two at the Holly'. Come to the audition?

CAROLINE: The *Holly*! You must be doing well. I haven't eaten there yet, never mind reviewed it.

RICHARD: What about doing both then, the day after tomorrow, at one?

CAROLINE: It's the meal that's the attractive proposition, Richard. I'm not sure seeing you again will be good for my digestion.

RICHARD: Let me book the table then, and if you show, you show.

CAROLINE: All right. Now you'll have to excuse me. I have a deadline.

RICHARD: See you in a couple of days.

*They both hang up. Immediately, Caroline's phone rings a couple of times and she answers it. Richard sits musing with a smile on his face until the end of the scene.*

CAROLINE: Hello! ... Mother! What are you doing lurking by the phone? If you want to talk to me about Richard Morrison I never want to see him again and he is *not* coming to one of your candle-lit suppers. Now, I have work to do so I'm hanging up on you. (*She puts the phone down and starts to type.*) "When Fred's Fresh Fish opened in Soho a month ago opinions were divided. Either it was a rather naff name for a new restaurant or the perfect advertisement, stating the proposition in only three words.

*The lights dim. There is a musical bridge. As the lights come up again, it is 1968 and the spaces to left and right now represent study-bedrooms in a redbrick university. Centre stage is a cafeteria table with two seats upstage of it. As the scene begins, Richard, a somewhat hairy postgraduate in his early twenties is reading, and Caroline, a mini-skirted undergraduate not yet twenty, is typing. From the radio on Richard's desk comes the period song "I'm Backing Britain,"*

RICHARD: Well *that* campaign died a death, thank goodness.

*Richard abruptly switches it off. Caroline pulls the typed page out of her Olivetti portable typewriter and stares at it.*

CAROLINE: Dear Lizzie – dammit, should be two zeds – here is my first bulletin from my own little study-bedroom in the Halls of Residence. I'm reading English which is really dreamy. We've been doing Virginia Woolf – it was such a shock when I realised that *Mrs*

*Dalloway* takes place all on one day. No wonder she feels exhausted. It's *terribly* moving and there are some *really* sad bits. I'm not sure what Lawrence will be like but did you know both Daddy and Mummy went secretly to Foyle's after the trial and bought *Lady C* then caught each other reading it. I remember they were awfully jolly, but neither of them would let me borrow their copy. We're encouraged to join societies or clubs to meet and mix so I've joined the YCs – they have super dances and sometimes go up to town to the theatre. We're going to see *The Mousetrap* in the spring; if it's still on of course. Tonight I'm going to the Am Drams which might be fun. We'll see anyway. Love, Caroline. (*She puts the letter down to sign it and adds a postscript by hand.*) PS: Sorry about not typing the two zeds in Lizzie. You can take marks off for that if you like. Write soon.

*Richard and Caroline exeunt. There is a reprise of "I'm backing Britain". Caroline enters carrying a tray of food and sits at the cafeteria table, centre stage. After a moment, Richard enters from the opposite direction, also carrying a tray, looks around for a seat and then approaches the table.*

RICHARD: I'm sorry, do you mind if we share?

CAROLINE: It's a free country.

RICHARD: Yet everywhere man is in chain stores, cafeterias or even betting shops.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry, is that supposed to mean something?

RICHARD: It was an allusion to Rousseau; he of Social Contract fame. Aren't you reading Sociology?

CAROLINE: English actually; so that was wasted on me.

RICHARD: I was just showing off.

CAROLINE: It seems to be a masculine fault.

RICHARD: Aha! Do I smell the blood of a feminist, or is it just menstruation.

*Caroline looks daggers at Richard, gathers up her tray and is about to walk off. He too rises.*

RICHARD: I'm very sorry. I was showing off again and I ought to have known better. I do apologise. I'll leave you in peace.

CAROLINE (*after a slight pause*): Apology accepted. Sit down. Just keep your Smart Alec remarks to yourself.

*They stare ahead and eat. She is eating a salad very neatly while he is tucking into a fry-up and using his knife and fork differently from her.*

RICHARD: Your first year, is it?

CAROLINE: Yes.

RICHARD: You'll like it here. I did my first degree here and liked it so much I stayed on for my MA.

CAROLINE: I thought you had to go away and do it somewhere else.

RICHARD: Some do. I was rather afraid they wouldn't let me in anywhere else. I took part in the sit-in.

CAROLINE: You should be ashamed of yourself.

RICHARD: We had legitimate grievances.

CAROLINE: Daddy said he'd have taken a horsewhip to you all.

RICHARD: Does Daddy *have* a horsewhip?

CAROLINE: No. He doesn't have a horse either, but he's a great believer in tradition; and so am I.

RICHARD: *My* Dad said he was proud of me. That made *me* feel ashamed.

CAROLINE: Surely you *should* be ashamed of wrecking the Dean's office.

RICHARD: Fortunately I'd gone out to get some ciggies when that happened; just before the police arrived. No, what I'm ashamed of is the fact that my prof called me in and said I'd got a First and that, if I went home at once and took no further part in the trouble, he had a place for me on his new Masters programme ... It only took me about two seconds to say yes.

CAROLINE: It seems to me you came to your senses just in time.

RICHARD: I'll never know. But I'm still a card-carrying Young Socialist and I read *Socialist Monthly*.

CAROLINE: I've joined the Young Conservatives. Mummy is the vice-chair of her constituency association. Daddy's voted for them all his life and he'd be cross if he knew I'd even *talked* to a Socialist.

RICHARD: Dear me; he sounds a bit of a bigot.

CAROLINE: Whatever he is, it's his own business and none of yours; so, if you'll excuse me ...

*Caroline picks up her tray and exits.*

RICHARD: I'd better chalk that one up to experience!

*Richard watches her leave then shrugs and shovels in the last of his own meal before picking up his tray and exiting. There is short musical bridge: An actor's life for me from Disney's Pinocchio. Richard enters and taking one of the chairs sits downstage of the table. He starts writing and is not looking up.*

RICHARD: Next!

*Caroline enters.*

RICHARD: Name?

CAROLINE: Good evening. I hope I'm not too late. My name is Caroline ... \*You!

RICHARD: You! (*He stands and is especially polite.*) Good evening, Caroline. I'm Richard. I'm not the director but I'm looking after casting because actually I've *written* the play. Right then: you're the last tonight so, if you're ready, what's it to be?

CAROLINE: Portia.

RICHARD: *She's* been a popular girl tonight! In your own time.

CAROLINE (*speaking with a clear understanding of the words*):  
"Tarry, Jew! The law hath yet another hold on you. It is enacted in the laws of Venice, if it be proved against an alien that by direct or indirect attempts he seek the life of any citizen, the party 'gainst the which he doth contrive shall seize one half his goods; the other half comes to the privy coffer of the state, and the offender's life lies in the mercy of the Duke only, 'gainst all other voice – in which predicament I say thou stand'st."

RICHARD: Thank you!

*Caroline starts to walk off.*

RICHARD: No, hang on! That was good. Have you acted before?

CAROLINE: Only at school, but I did play Portia, and I'm very fond of Shakespeare as a matter of fact.

RICHARD: I think we need to talk some more and you were the very last so, as the Duke said, "I entreat you home with me to dinner."

CAROLINE: "I humbly do desire your grace of pardon. I must away this night towards Padua, and it is meet I presently set forth."

RICHARD: Very good! But we need to talk about the play. I begin to feel you'd be a natural for the female lead.

CAROLINE: Really!

RICHARD: How easy do you find learning a part?

CAROLINE: Not too difficult.

RICHARD: What else have you done?

CAROLINE: We did *Much Ado* at school. I played Beatrice. My brother was Benedick which made it easy to do the quarrels but not the love bits. What's *your* play about?

RICHARD: I've taken the story of Manon Lescaut and the Chevalier des Grieux and transposed it to twentieth century London. Do you know it?

CAROLINE: Not really. I quite like French food, though. Mummy and Daddy go to the Charente every year. Do you know the Charente?

RICHARD: I've never met them! Sorry, joking again.

CAROLINE: Tell me about your play.

RICHARD: Okay, it's called *Marion Lithgow* and she's an Essex girl sent up to London to work in her uncle's shop. But when she gets off the bus, she literally bumps into this boy, Desmond Gray, who's spending the summer at a dreadful crammer trying to get his Latin and Greek up to scratch. They have a cup of frothy coffee together and try to hatch a clever plan and the upshot is they run away together and hide in Brixton.

CAROLINE: Does it have a happy ending?

RICHARD: Not really. Would you like to hear the whole story?

CAROLINE: I suppose so. Who's playing Desmond?

RICHARD: I am, actually. I hope that's not a problem.

CAROLINE: Not yet! But I'd like to hear more about the play.

RICHARD: Okay. She's much more worldly-wise than him and when they find a place to stay in Brixton she persuades him to let her manage their finances while he goes off every day to his crammer. About a month later, he comes home and she's all weepy but says there's nothing wrong. The audience probably think she's in the family way but when she goes out of the room to fetch his supper, a couple of heavies barge in with his elder brother and snatch him.

Back home, his old man listens to his pleading to be allowed to go back to Marion, saying she must be distraught at his disappearance. His father just laughs and asks him who he thinks told them where to find him. Look, I think it would be easier if you read the play. Can't I persuade you to have a cup of frothy coffee at the Union?

CAROLINE: Sorry, I haven't time to 'hatch a clever plan' tonight. I still have fifty pages to read before my tutorial tomorrow morning.

RICHARD: Too bad, I was rather hoping ...

CAROLINE (*After a slight pause*): If you're free tomorrow night, we could go into town for a meal.

RICHARD: Wonderful! That gets me out of the Anti-Vietnam War meeting. What time?

CAROLINE: Six thirty? I've spotted a nice French restaurant in the High Street I'd like to try.

RICHARD: I'll walk you back to the Halls then, so we can put a chalk mark on the pavement where we have to meet.

CAROLINE: There's only one bus stop and only one bus; oh and, for the record, it's my treat.

RICHARD: Well, I don't know if ...

CAROLINE: ... I invited you and I chose the restaurant so let's get off on the right foot. My treat or not at all!

RICHARD: Then it's my turn next time. You do like fish and chips, don't you?

CAROLINE: So long as it's Dover sole!

*Exeunt. The lights dim.*

*It's 2008 once again. As the lights come up, there is a dining table that bridges her space and centrestage and Caroline is standing in an apron looking at the table and then at her watch. Her mobile rings.*

CAROLINE: Caroline Roth ... Richard! I was beginning to wonder ... That's all right. Now I know you're almost here I can pop the pigs' trotters in the microwave. (*Pause*) No, no, no! I didn't mean that literally. In fact it's a cheese soufflé. I didn't know you had a heart condition ... Fine! We'll stick to white wine. I'll see you shortly.

*She drains her glass of red wine and exits, coming back a moment later with two white wine glasses and a bottle of white wine which she*

*expertly uncorks. She fills her own glass and takes it to the sofa and sits down.*

CAROLINE: Richard Morrison! Richard! And the crazy thing is if we'd booked Peter Hall like I wanted, we might never have got round to you.

*The lights dim and when they come up again Richard and Caroline are sitting over the remains of their meal. A bouquet of flowers has appeared in a vase on her desk. Richard is slightly tipsy.*

CAROLINE: Swings and roundabouts, or ups and downs perhaps; but if I'm going to be clinically precise, a series of runnings-away and the odd staying-put. Sorry, not very good English in the presence of a wordsmith, but that's what my life's been like. Have I learned anything? Perhaps; I think I'm a *marginally* better person.

RICHARD: Bearing in mind that anything you say will be misremembered and recycled in a play; give me a 'for instance'.

CAROLINE: I think there very well could *be* a play in it all. There certainly was enough conflict to amount to a drama; a tragicomedy, perhaps.

RICHARD: Tragedy, comedy.

CAROLINE: Historical, pastoral.

RICHARD: Pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical – I've written them all!

CAROLINE: But have you written tragical-comical-*historical*-pastoral?

RICHARD: I'm working on it even now. Cheers!

CAROLINE: That takes me back, and while I'm back there, I'll tell you what changed me; for the better, I hope.

RICHARD: Do.

CAROLINE: I *did* rather walk out on you last time and, afterwards, I got quite paranoid about accidentally running into you. I don't think I could have coped. Then *Just Rewards* head-hunted me, to be their European Editor, and I grabbed it with both hands. It was a wonderful magazine, and they seemed to think I was running my end of it pretty well. So, when the Managing Editor died suddenly I was offered his job, in New York. A *dream* job; hugely overpaid.

RICHARD: I'm sure you deserved every last cent.

CAROLINE: And yet, as they say, it wasn't buying me happiness. I'd been a single girl too long; and that's when I met Julius. Art Editor of a really sophisticated quarterly, *Manhattan Man*, divorced, 50-ish, and twice as handsome as Paul Newman.

RICHARD: Sounds too good to be true.

CAROLINE: Now why did that never occur to *me*? No, I just fell for him and within a few months, *he* was proposing marriage. The crazy thing was it all seemed like the most wonderful foreplay. We *never* had sex and he made it seem like sheer old-fashioned, Doris Day-type romance; with the dam due to break on our wedding night.

RICHARD: New York in the nineties! That's hard to credit.

CAROLINE: It seemed so unbelievably romantic, right up to the door of the bridal suite. He even carried me over the threshold. (*Pause*) And that was when he told me he was gay; that his previous marriage had been a sham; that his wife had finally walked. We cried in each others arms all night.

RICHARD: A baptism of tears?

CAROLINE: A washing away of sin. A change of heart and soul. The birth of the new Caroline: a. k. a. Mrs Julius Roth. (*She pauses and dries a tear.*) I'm sorry.

RICHARD: Don't stop now. What happened?

CAROLINE: By the morning, I realised that I was still deeply in love with him. His wooing had been so wonderful I simply couldn't bear to be without it and without him. (*Pause*) That was when he asked me if Max could come and live with us.

RICHARD: Max?

CAROLINE: His lover. A long-standing monogamous relationship; or so he told me.

RICHARD: And?

CAROLINE: And I agreed.

RICHARD: How long could an arrangement like that last?

CAROLINE: It lasted as long as he lived. My father had always been such a homophobe so, paradoxically, being a celibate housekeeper to a couple of queens, one of whom I loved, seemed like poetic justice.

RICHARD: Now *there's* a paradox: *knowledge* was bliss, rather than ignorance ... Wait a minute! You said, as long as he lived. You're a widow? Was it, you know ...?

CAROLINE (*nodding silently and pausing before speaking with an ironic laugh*): And the night after the funeral, Max climbed into my bed and made love like I'd never experienced it before. (*In the briefest of pauses, Richard reacts with astonishment but does not speak.*) I never really asked him why. Was he missing Julius so much that making love to *me* was as close as he could get to *him*? I was so wrapped up in this so sudden, so unexpected, physical explosion I didn't want to risk spoiling it by asking questions.

RICHARD: But it *did* spoil?

CAROLINE: Eventually ... when Max asked me, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, if he could bring his new lover to live with us.

RICHARD: The pattern repeating itself.

CAROLINE (*shaking her head*): I broke the mould. I turned him out. I had a nervous breakdown; and I drank myself into rehab.

RICHARD: Ye Gods!

CAROLINE: I was well cared for, but my job had gone. There was nothing to keep me in America, and Mummy was getting old and frail. So I came back to finish my recovery over here. (*Pause*) Then, in no time at all, I found myself caring fulltime for her until she drowned in dementia.

RICHARD: I'm so sorry. I thought *I'd* had a tough time but this, all this ...

CAROLINE: Want to know the fairy tale ending?

RICHARD: Don't jest!

CAROLINE: My mother died. I'm her sole heir and, even after death duties, I need never work again.

RICHARD: I don't believe it!

CAROLINE: It's true. Mother Carey had left her nest egg untouched where my father had put it with Warren Buffet all these years ago and lived off the income. Despite the ups and downs of the market, Mother Carey's only chicken inherited a small fortune, a chunk of which I put into Roth Productions.

RICHARD: Some people have all the luck.

CAROLINE: Do I detect a faint smell of cliché?

RICHARD: Sorry; I'm trying to give them up. There are very few in my plays, honestly.

CAROLINE: And talking about plays, what *was* it attracted you to reworking Beaumarchais?

RICHARD: I really don't remember now. I think you need to see the plays.

CAROLINE: The play I'd really like to see is the one you talked about; your multiple-choice melodrama.

RICHARD: I still have to write that; and, more to the point, find someone willing to back it. I would have put my own money into it but, three years ago, my financial manager embezzled the lot and then fled the country. I'm more or less all right day-to-day now, but I can kiss goodbye to being my own theatrical angel.

CAROLINE: Then let me make you a proposition. If I can have the film and television rights, I'll bankroll the stage production. Just line-up the theatre, find a good director \*and ...

RICHARD: ... and write the play!

CAROLINE: Exactly. (*Caroline's phone starts to ring. She glances at it.*) This is New York and I think I may be a long time. Dear Richard, can you let yourself out? Go home and write the play. I'll call you in the morning. (*They blow each other kisses and he exits.*) This is Caroline Roth ... and good afternoon to you, Max.

*The stage lights dim. The next scene takes place in 1988. Richard takes his place centre stage at a restaurant table. As the lights come up, he is studying the menu. There is an opened bottle of wine already on the table and Richard's glass is half empty. He consults his watch, looks around and then returns to reading the menu. Caroline enters from his blind side; pauses to appraise him and then advances.*

CAROLINE: Sorry I'm late. It wasn't intentional.

RICHARD: If I wasn't forbidden to let a cliché pass my lips before eating, I'd say, "better late than never" but I really am glad to see you.

CAROLINE: I think I'm pleased to see *you* but I'll give you a more considered verdict later. You've put on some weight, Richard, but you look well.

RICHARD: By contrast, you are slim and trim. Well done; especially for a restaurant critic. Anyway, as the Bard said, "To me, fair friend, you never can be old; / For as you were when first your eye I eyed, / *Such* seems your beauty still."

CAROLINE: Well, whatever your other problems; time seems to be treating your tongue kindly.

RICHARD: You should see its portrait in the attic!

CAROLINE: My cliché detector just registered a hit.

RICHARD: “A very palpable hit!”

CAROLINE: Stop! Let’s have a conversation, not a contest.

*There is a pause while they look at each other and then both begin to laugh.*

CAROLINE: I think we’re both a little too nervous. Pour me a drink and I’ll try to relax.

RICHARD: You’re right. How are you? What have you been doing?

CAROLINE: I’d rather you started.

RICHARD: Fair enough. Well then; after university, I struck lucky. I landed a job at the Beeb; in drama. And I went on working on my own writing. I did a translation of the Pagnol trilogy ...

CAROLINE: ... The *what* trilogy?

RICHARD: Sorry, three plays about characters in the old port of Marseilles – *Marius*, *Fanny* and *César* – spanning twenty years and finishing up looking at a son brought up in luxury and the return of his prodigal father. A university dramatic society in California had a Marcel Pagnol festival in the seventies and staged all three, but they’ve never seen the light of day since.

CAROLINE: Shame!

RICHARD: Who knows? Then I revised my modern version of *Manon*. That did well in the provinces but it only ran seven weeks in the West End.

CAROLINE: That one I do know.

RICHARD: Of course you do. What you maybe didn’t know is the leading lady was Jenny Barker.

CAROLINE: *The* Jenny Barker?

RICHARD: Also known as Mrs Richard Morrison, but, alas, not to her wide circle of friends.

CAROLINE: *You* married Jenny Barker?

RICHARD: When last I checked I'm *still* married to her; but she wants out. That's my current big problem.

CAROLINE: Any children?

RICHARD: A boy: just turned seventeen. Jenny insisted on calling him Dick. They're both in LA. She has so much work she hasn't been back for two years. I miss the boy very much. I was pretty much the house father when he was a youngster.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry.

RICHARD: No need to be. It wasn't all that successful a marriage. She didn't seem to notice my absences from the marital bed but then she gave her press cuttings service the job of keeping an eye on me, and that's why I seem to be in trouble.

CAROLINE: What sort of trouble?

RICHARD: The usual sort of trouble ... Have you seen my new play, *Campus*, at the National?

CAROLINE: Afraid not.

RICHARD: Don't go!

CAROLINE: What's wrong with it?

RICHARD: Nothing much, in fact it's probably my best work so far; but it's about a student uprising at a redbrick university in 1968 and I wouldn't want you trying to guess who any of the characters were in real life.

CAROLINE: I see ... Am *I* in it?

RICHARD: No ... Yes ... I don't know. The thing is, the leading lady is a lovely girl, Karen Linden, and I rather fell for her. We were terribly discreet about it but we were photographed side-by-side at a first night party and you'd have to be blind not to see the way we're looking at each other. The cutting service served that up on a platter and the next thing I knew there was a nasty phone call from Jenny, and a noxious *billet-doux* from her attorney. It rather seems she'd been watching and waiting.

CAROLINE: For what?

RICHARD: For the chance to hit me with a divorce suit on the basis of *my* infidelity. She's suing for divorce, for alimony, and exclusive custody of Dick. I'm having to defend the suit in California. It's a mess.

CAROLINE: And what about Karen?

RICHARD: That's the ironic part. The lawyer's letter arrived the week after we split up. She's gone back to her partner. (*Pause*) As well as being a thespian, it turns out she's a lesbian, and I'd just been her bisexual bit on the side.

*Caroline bursts into laughter then claps her hand over her mouth.*

CAROLINE: Richard, I'm so sorry. It's wrong to laugh but it seems like something out of a play.

RICHARD: Don't apologise; laughter's an ice-breaker.

CAROLINE: What I envy is your having a child. I know Mummy's told you about me ... my husband hung around until he'd made enough contacts to put himself up for sale to the highest bidder. He'd worked for Daddy all those years; Daddy made him a partner, but right after Big Bang it was clear he'd been preparing his exit for ages.

RICHARD: From his job, or from your marriage?

CAROLINE: You might as well lump the two together. When he quit the firm, he ditched *me* into the bargain. He'd just managed to get his latest PA pregnant and, of course, I hadn't given him a son and heir.

RICHARD: Dear me; you have all these problems and I'm selfish enough to think that I can invite you for a meal and then dump mine on you.

CAROLINE: That's all right. It's not as if we're total strangers. It's probably good for us both to talk. Tell me about *yourself*. Are you still reading *Socialist Monthly*.

RICHARD: Not for donkey's years. Since Maggie risked everything to get back the Falklands I've been a closet Tory. I expect your mother would be pleased to hear that!

CAROLINE: And yet Daddy wouldn't.

RICHARD: That *does* surprise me!

CAROLINE: His brokerage firm specialised in industrials and they were totally massacred by Maggie. Just before he died, he was voting SDP.

RICHARD: That makes me think!

CAROLINE: While you're thinking, I'll look at the menu.

RICHARD: Literally, be my guest!

*The lights dim.*

*It's October 1968. To the accompaniment of French accordion music Richard and Caroline enter. She's at her ease but he's nervous. They take their seats at the restaurant table, Richard helping her to her chair and hanging her coat on the coat stand. They study the menu. She seems to be weighing up the choices. He seems to be more and more alarmed, not least when he picks up the wine list.*

CAROLINE: I'd like to start with the *moules marinières* and then the skate wing.

RICHARD: I never knew skates had wings!

CAROLINE: Try it. It's delicious with *beurre noisette*.

RICHARD: I might just do that; but I'll stick to what I know for starters; prawn cocktail. How about the house white to wash it down?

CAROLINE: I think we ought to have the Blanc de Limoux and, remember, I said it was my treat. I want to write a review of the place for *Varsity Views*.

RICHARD: But listen, let me pay for ...

CAROLINE: ... No, you listen! I don't want you to get the wrong impression of me but the fact is Daddy's a stockbroker and he lets me have a very generous allowance which is why we're here. If there's a next time, I'm game to try jellied eels. I might even write about that too.

RICHARD: I'm out of my depth here; this Tory lifestyle.

CAROLINE: That's such a Labour cliché. We are what we are. We're from different backgrounds. At university I'm just another undergraduate, but restaurants are familiar territory, so trust me. Tell me more about your play. You said they'd been staying in Brixton but his father has fetched him home and told him more about Marion than he liked to hear.

RICHARD: Exactly! So, after a period of thinking about it and reading the letter Marion wrote to his father, young Des has a chat with one of his mates and decides to go to Uni after all and read Divinity. As it happens, he's brilliant and in his final year he gets invited to deliver the annual student sermon at St James's in Piccadilly. Meantime, Marion has become the mistress of a Tory MP.

CAROLINE: Why Tory? Why not Labour? Or even Liberal.

RICHARD: I don't know, really. Prejudice again, I suppose. But the point is the sermon is something of a social event and this MP plans to go and hear Desmond and happens to tell Marion about it. When she realises who the speaker is, she asks him to take her with him but he's too much of a coward to be seen with her in public. That gets her mad and she decides to go anyway and stand at the back of the church. The upshot is she's so moved by the sight of him and his sermon that she waylays him coming out of the vestry and whisks him off to Lyon's Corner House ...

CAROLINE: ... Oh come on! The Café Royal surely!

RICHARD: You might be right. I'll think about that. So by the time she's been talking to him for half an hour about how unhappy she is and how sorry for last time, he's head over heels in love again and it doesn't take her long to persuade him to wait in the taxi outside her apartment while she carries off the jewellery and money and clothes the MP has given her. And off they go, back to Brixton.

CAROLINE: This is real *News of the World* stuff.

RICHARD: I'd be shocked to think you've even *seen* a copy.

CAROLINE: Come off it, Dick. I'm nearly nineteen.

RICHARD: Caroline, do me one favour. Round here, I prefer Richard. My mother kept calling me 'Dickey Bird' and when I came here I made a clean break.

CAROLINE: Sorry, Richard. If you'll flag down the waiter, we can order and you can go on telling me about Marion and Des: or round here should it be Desmond?

RICHARD: Touché!

*The stage lights dim for a couple of minutes as, to more accordion music, they go through the mime of being served their meal and consuming it. They seem to be enjoying each other's company.*

CAROLINE: You're saying that, after her funeral, Des just goes back home and gets a job as a social worker! Doesn't that sound a bit of an anticlimax? Much ado about nothing!

RICHARD (*on the edge of tipsy*): Hah! Do you see yourself as Beatrice? I wouldn't have minded getting in an argument with her!

CAROLINE: "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor (*beat*) 'Dick!' Nobody marks you."

RICHARD: "What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?"

CAROLINE: “Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor ... *Dick*? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain if you come in her presence.”

RICHARD: “Then is courtesy a turncoat. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted.” (*He puts down his glass and raises his hands in mock surrender.*) Stop, stop! I’ve met my match. If anyone could make me a Tory, it would be you.

CAROLINE: But would they have you?

RICHARD: “Well, you are a rare parrot teacher.”

CAROLINE: “A bird of my tongue is better than a bird of yours.”

RICHARD: Game, set and match! Thank you for an excellent meal. I can’t begin to tell you how much I’ve enjoyed myself.

CAROLINE: Have I got the part?

RICHARD: It was never in doubt. Now, let me summon up enough energy to escort you back to Halls. You know ... I think I’ve had a little too much to drink.

CAROLINE: Half the first bottle and most of the second. Fetch my coat and I’ll race you to the bus. And then you must give me the script.

*Richard fetches her coat and gallantly helps her into it. As they walk off, she takes his arm. After a musical interlude, [perhaps another burst of Cocktails for Two,] Richard and Caroline enter Richard’s room, arm in arm.*

RICHARD (*still tipsy*): Welcome to my ...

CAROLINE: ... if you say ‘humble abode’, I won’t believe you’re a writer. Good writers don’t use other people’s clichés.

RICHARD: Right again! Far right, in fact. We left-wing writers should create new proletarian clichés, stamping out our own coinage like the Bard: new words, new phrases, new sentences, and new ideas ... I need to sit down!

CAROLINE: Before you do, Richard Burbage, where’s the play?

RICHARD: On the desk. There’s a pile of them.

CAROLINE: Where do we start then?

RICHARD: Don’t you want to read it through first?

CAROLINE: Let’s jump in at the deep end.

RICHARD: Okay! Page 19, from the top.

*[As they read the script, they rather overdo the dramatic voices and gestures, with hints of a Noël Coward style.]*

RICHARD: “My ordination is only a couple of months away.”

CAROLINE: “And would you be ashamed to invite me to be there?”

RICHARD: “Embarrassed certainly. I have never so much as held any girl’s hand since then.”

CAROLINE: “Then hold mine now. *(He takes the hand she offers.)* There, that wasn’t so difficult. But you could rescue me again; if you really wanted to.”

RICHARD: “How could I possibly do that?”

*Caroline kisses Richard’s hand and puts it against her cheek.*

CAROLINE: “You’ve earned a holiday after all your hard work. If I take you to the seaside, you could ... give me instruction and, who knows, maybe I could teach you a few things about life; things that would help you to understand the sort of people you want to help.”

*She puts her hand behind his neck.*

CAROLINE: “Thinks like tenderness, compassion and love.”

*Caroline gently pulls Richard to her and they kiss tenderly, dropping their scripts.*

RICHARD: Oh Marion, we need to do that bit again. Just to get it right.

CAROLINE: Desmond, my lovely Desmond.

RICHARD: Beatrice!

CAROLINE: Benedick!

*They kiss passionately and collapse onto the bed.*

RICHARD: Caroline?

CAROLINE: Dearest little Dickey Bird.

*The stage lights go out and the music swells; Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet.*

End of Act One.

ACT TWO

*To a musical accompaniment [e.g. Noël Coward's There are bad times just around the corner], the curtain rises. It's Monday, September 1, 2008. Richard is in his flat where his desk has a great deal more paper and books than previously and he is alternately typing and looking up references in books. His mobile rings.*

RICHARD: Piers! ... Yes, tonight's the night. The table's booked for eight. What's on your mind? ... No question, things are not looking rosy; but does that affect our project? ... Is that so? Well, an offer to direct yet another sequel to Star Wars might well trump directing an experimental play but I thought we had a deal ... I don't feel like arguing the point. Why can't you do both? Would that set back the shooting schedule? ... Yes, I realise what it could do to your career, and at warp speed, but in my warped little mind I'm wondering if this is you looking for an excuse to welsh on the deal: no offence intended! ... No, it isn't finished. I need at least another month. Making sure all the scenes can be played in any order takes more time ... Bigger Ayckbourn! I'm not writing a farce, well, not intentionally ... Piers, I need a willing horse, not one I have to drag to water ... Then bloody well, *take* offence because this time it *is* intended. (*Hangs up*) Right, no gentleman writes after five.

*Richard exits through the door stage left and while he is off stage Caroline lets herself in his other door carrying a couple of bags of shopping. Richard comes back on stage holding his glass and immediately looks guilty.*

RICHARD: I should never have given you that key. I'm caught red-handed!

CAROLINE: Not if that drink's for me.

RICHARD: Well, of course it is; but when you've heard my news you may let me have a little one.

CAROLINE: Go and get it then, because I have news as well.

RICHARD: That sounds like doubles all round.

CAROLINE: Bring the bottle and plenty of ice.

*She flops on the sofa and kicks off her shoes while Richard exits briefly, returning with a tray holding bottles and an ice-bucket. He pours himself a stiff drink and sits beside her.*

RICHARD: Up your kilt, as McTattie always says. (*They drink.*)

CAROLINE: Your news first.

RICHARD: Piers has been poached to do another Star Wars.

CAROLINE: Thank goodness. That's one less problem.

RICHARD: But he would have been ideal.

CAROLINE: Take another big swallow and listen ... My capital is in jeopardy. Max's partner has insider gossip that Lehman Brothers are on the skids and may go into Chapter 11 any day now. He's managed to get *some* of my money out and put in safer hands, but if Lehman's were to *fail* then I wouldn't have the funds to finance your play.

RICHARD: Can't you do what all the other lemmings are doing? Take all your money out and put it into real estate.

CAROLINE: I would if I could but this is Labour Day in the States and everything's closed. Fortunately my investment in Roth Productions is fully paid up but with advertising revenues heading south, there may be lean times ahead. I just hope Max's new broker, *Bernard (English pronunciation)* somebody or other, can live up to his promises.

RICHARD: I'll drink to that. I'm sorry you've got problems. At least we've got each other!

CAROLINE (*joking*): That's all right for you – but what about me!

*They laugh and snuggle closer on the sofa.*

RICHARD: Forget about the play then. All these financial upheavals; well, they come and they go. It was much the same with me when that bastard ran off with my money. Do you remember asking me, in that interview, what prompted me to write comedy for a change? Well, the truth was simply to cheer myself up. But now the joke's on me.

CAROLINE: Meaning what?

RICHARD: The SFO tell me they've tracked down my missing accountant. They're hoping to collar him very soon.

CAROLINE: So now what do we do?

RICHARD: For a start, let's move in together.

*Caroline shakes her head and bangs it as if she has water in her ear.*

CAROLINE: Am I mistaken, or is there an echo in here?

RICHARD: This time it would be different.

CAROLINE: Oh, it would be different all right.

RICHARD: Oh good!

CAROLINE: It's simply that although I *know* you: the 'you' I knew in any depth is not the September 2008 you. I need more time and, if you like, more wooing.

RICHARD: Then stay the night.

CAROLINE: Why?

RICHARD: To wit: to woo!

*They laugh and Richard pours another round of drinks.*

RICHARD: Here's mud in your eye!

*Caroline's mobile rings. Richard heads towards the left exit.*

RICHARD: I'll put a quiche in the oven.

CAROLINE: Hello, Melissa? What's so urgent you have to ... What!! ... Who else is on the short list? ... Then it's all to play for. We need a crash meeting of the whole team, even if you have to get them all out of bed. This is too good and too big to miss. Ten p.m. at the office. Let's go for it!

*Still talking on her phone, Caroline grabs her 'things' and exits by Richard's upstage door. We hear the outer door slam. After a pause, Richard re-enters and looks around. Seeing no one, he picks up his mobile phone and dials a number. He listens for a moment then throws it on the sofa.*

*The stage lights dim. Centre stage is set as a restaurant table. It's the following day and Richard and Caroline are each in their own rooms, conversing on their mobiles.*

RICHARD: It's beginning to jell. I've tried several different sequences now and they all seem to work.

CAROLINE: Do some work better than others?

RICHARD: Each one *feels* different.

CAROLINE: So, it matters how you hear the news, does it?

RICHARD: You could put it that way. But I have to be careful I don't have too many events in scenes played earlier that are obviously contingent on actions in later scenes. For instance, I can't serve up a quiche in one scene and put it in the oven in the next.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry about that. I just had to dash off. I'll explain when we meet. Sorry about supper.

RICHARD: No problem; I ate it all myself; but your phone's been red hot for twenty-four hours so I couldn't tell you how good it tasted. What are you up to, Caroline?

CAROLINE: Like in your plays, my dear, all will be revealed: but trust me for one more day and then let's meet on neutral territory.

RICHARD: I thought we'd stopped speaking in riddles.

CAROLINE: This won't be a riddle but the answer to one. Where shall we meet?

RICHARD: I'll play along with this because I'm a dramatist but it had better make sense in the end. What about your favourite place: Fred's Fresh Fish; still in business, despite the terrible reviews you've been giving it?

CAROLINE: Splendid. Now listen; I'm nipping over to Dublin this very moment so I'll come to Fred's straight from the airport on my way back tonight. Book it for nine, rather than earlier.

RICHARD: This sounds fishy.

CAROLINE: So it does! Even so, trust me!

RICHARD: With the exception of Hamish, you're probably the only person I'd trust with anything.

CAROLINE: Right then. See you tonight.

*The stage lights dim. [The musical bridge could be the Henry Hall version of The Teddy Bear's Picnic especially the words, "if you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise"]. As the lights come up, the year is 1988. Caroline enters through the rear door into her space, followed by Richard.*

CAROLINE: Come on in. I'm afraid it's a bit of a tip. I need to get organised.

RICHARD: Cliché! But work has to come first.

CAROLINE: True; okay, I'm safely home; thanks for walking me back; would you mind terribly if I got on with my review. If I fax it over by six, it can make the first edition.

RICHARD: Go ahead.

CAROLINE: Why don't you fix yourself a hair of the dog?

RICHARD: Rather have a coffee. Want one?

CAROLINE: Have to be instant, I'm afraid. There should be milk in the fridge. And yes, I'd like one too.

*Richard exits and we hear appropriate noises off. For a moment, Caroline gazes after him with a smile and a sigh. Then she shakes her head.*

CAROLINE: Don't even think about it! Not yet anyway.

*She sets her typewriter up with two sheets of paper interleaved with carbon paper and begins to type.*

RICHARD (*off-stage*): Sugar?

CAROLINE: Two please! Nice to be waited on for a change ... To work! (*Dictating to herself as she types*) "Cuisine minceur was created by French chef Michel Guérard to tempt Parisians into making the 500 mile trek to his wife's health spa comma but in London it has become the label restaurants apply to truly tiny portions at staggeringly high prices full stop. So comma it is with some relief that your correspondent can report that comma as far as The Holly is concerned comma lean is not also mean full stop. True colon, my companion's starter ..."

*She backs up the typewriter's carriage and over-types the word.*

CAROLINE: ... better call it "hors d'oeuvre comma shell fish ravioli comma cooked to perfection comma did consist of only one very large *raviolo* comma if there is such a singular noun comma with six different fillings arranged like wedges of a pie full stop. He gave it ten out of ten full stop."

*Richard enters with two coffees. While Caroline goes on typing, now silently, he drains his coffee and puts the cup down.*

RICHARD: I'll leave you to get on with this. Matter of fact, I'm hoping for a phone call tonight I don't want to miss.

CAROLINE: Oh ... I was hoping you could stay for a while. This won't take me too long.

RICHARD (*beat*): Another time, perhaps. I'd better go.

CAROLINE: She must *matter* to you!

RICHARD: It's my son, actually. He calls me every couple of weeks. With the eight hour difference this is about the best time for both of us; not least because his mother is usually out.

CAROLINE: Forgive me. I was being selfish. But if you're serious about "another time" I think I would like that. I hadn't expected to find you such pleasant company.

*They embrace quite decorously until Caroline puts her hands up to his face and kisses him on the lips. The lights go to black and there is another short musical interlude, [ from Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet ]*

*As the lights come up again, it's three or four months later. A dining table set for a meal for two is on the edge of his space and downstage. His door bell gives a rather naff "ding-dong" and an offstage Richard calls out ...*

RICHARD (offstage): Coming.

*He enters from the kitchen wearing an apron and slinging oven gloves over his shoulder. As he heads for the door, he switches off the radio, ending the music. He exits through the rear door and we hear him greeting Caroline.*

RICHARD (offstage): Come in my darling. Oh thank you, you really shouldn't have. Do come through.

*They enter together. He is carrying a bottle of wine.*

RICHARD: Take a pew. I'll bring you a drink.

CAROLINE: Cliché!

*Richard acknowledges the hit with a smile and a bow then exits with the wine, returning a moment later with a couple of vodka/tonics, clinking with ice. They settle on the sofa together.*

RICHARD: Dinner needs a few minutes. Cheers. How was your day?

CAROLINE: Cheers. As a matter of fact, my dear, it has been a rather delightful day, and it's all thanks to you ... No, don't deny it. I saw the editor today and he says it's all going rather swimmingly. The whole Yuppie lifestyle section is pulling in page after page of high-quality advertising; and now guess what! I'm on the permanent staff, three months sooner than he'd planned. Thanks again for mentioning me.

RICHARD: You were just the right person. Well done.

CAROLINE: I love the work. It gets me out of the flat every day.

RICHARD: Then let's celebrate. I'll bring in the casserole.

*He exits and returns, putting a pot on the table. As he straightens up, Caroline embraces and kisses him. They break their clinch and sit at the table.*

CAROLINE: I can't tell you how suspicious I was of you at first. After all, how should a girl feel when someone from her past calls her up out of the blue? It feels so good that we're really getting on together and I'm sure the quality of my writing has improved. That must be your influence too. So, how has your week been?

RICHARD: Not brilliant. I've had my latest film script rejected. Hamish says I ought to ask myself what's happening to my style. He wants me to go away for two or three months and focus on the rewrite.

CAROLINE: But what would *I* do if you went off like that? I need you here. You're my Muse.

RICHARD: I haven't said I'll do it, but it's a fact that I used to be able to shut the door, take the phone off the hook, and just write away for hours on end. I haven't been *doing* that lately.

CAROLINE: Then let's think about that. Perhaps we could go away over Christmas and New Year. I mean the lifestyle part of the magazine can be written months in advance, right through to the February issue, in fact; so we could find some warm hideaway and you could write while I curl up with a good book. Apart from that, what else is new?

RICHARD: Dick isn't sounding too happy. Nothing I could put my finger on; and he shied away whenever I asked questions. Matter of fact, I've been thinking of inviting him over for two or three weeks, over Christmas and New Year when Jenny is going off to Mexico with Ramon. I do miss seeing him.

CAROLINE: Why not have him over for Thanksgiving, and then you and *I* can still get away. Then everyone will be happy. That reminds me; not everyone *is* happy.

RICHARD: Who's missing out on the general bonhomie?

CAROLINE: Mummy! She keeps on asking when you and I are going to come for supper. She's feeling neglected.

RICHARD: Poor woman: when last did you go and see her?

CAROLINE: Not since I started work at *The Onlooker*.

RICHARD: But that's more than three months!

CAROLINE: Don't lecture me! You know how busy I've been.

RICHARD: Okay, okay: but family's family! I'll see how he feels about a visit but I'm going to let him choose the time. I don't want to hassle him. With Jenny wanting to hasten the divorce and softening her terms just a fraction so she and Ramon can get married before the baby arrives, I need to be very cautious.

CAROLINE: It's all these anxieties affecting your work, my darling. Arrange things just how you like; just so long as we two stay friends. We are still friends, aren't we?

RICHARD: There's all the evidence of that strewn around my bedroom. I've never known a woman so untidy.

CAROLINE: How many women have you known?

RICHARD: Not that many.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry; that was bitchy. I think I'm just a little jealous of Dick getting your attention. I'm sure if I met him that would make me feel better. Talking about feeling better, this casserole is delicious and that reminds me. There's a special do at El Greco tomorrow night and I really ought to go. Can you meet me at the office so we can go straight there?

RICHARD: Caroline, we have tickets for Covent Garden. It's been in the dairy for two months!

CAROLINE: Oh lord, I'm sorry, but it's really important for me to be seen at El Greco. Can't we change the tickets?

*Go to black. Musical bridge.*

*As the lights come up it's December 1968. Richard and Caroline are rehearsing centre stage. He is fully into his part but she sounds very wooden. [Their 'play-within-a-play' voices should sound just a tad amateurish.]*

RICHARD: "I rue the day that brother of yours spotted you in Soho. He's been like a leech, a real blood-sucker, ever since. Why do we need to *do* this?"

CAROLINE: "For the money, Desmond! You're only earning enough in that Language School to cover the rent but we need to eat as well. We need to have a drink now and then. We need some fun. I mean, these are supposed to be the swinging sixties but I'm beginning to feel very much unswung."

RICHARD: Caroline, try to put some more feeling into it. You're positively leaden today. Right then! "What's happened to your job?"

You told me last week they were going to put you in reception and give you more money.”

CAROLINE: “That was because I wasn’t doing terribly well as a filing clerk but the managing partner thought I looked glamorous enough to be a model and said he wanted to see my smiling face when he came into Chambers in the morning. So I quit.”

RICHARD: “Why?”

CAROLINE: “Because he told me that behind the filing cabinets as he tried to unhook my bra.”

RICHARD: “Well I have to ask myself what’s so different between the managing partner’s proposition that makes you quit your job and your brother’s ideas that you seem so eager to go along with. Where’s the difference?”

CAROLINE (*herself*): The difference is I’m pregnant. Two *months* pregnant. And it’s all your bloody fault!

RICHARD (*after a long pause*): That wasn’t in the script! (*a shorter pause*) Besides isn’t every woman on the pill these days?

CAROLINE: You selfish pig! So it’s *my* fault is it?

RICHARD: No, no; and I’m sorry I said that. Listen, if it’s my child, I’m its father and I’ll stand by you.

CAROLINE: What do you mean “if it’s my child”? Are you calling me a slut? You helped yourself to my virginity and you can’t give that back to me.

RICHARD: No, of course I can’t, but I can do the right thing. We’ll get married! Yes, straightaway. Then, just think, we can appear as a husband and wife team, with you starring in your husband’s first play.

CAROLINE: You utterly selfish bastard! All you’re worried about is your miserable bloody play, with your fancy woman playing the whore.

RICHARD: No! I mean yes; I’m worried about the play but no, I’m not worried about it as much as I’m concerned for you. Come here. (*Beat*) Will you, Caroline, take me, Richard, to be your lawful wedded husband?

CAROLINE: No! (*Beat*) I want an abortion!

RICHARD: What!

CAROLINE: It’s all right for you. Where *you* come from, shotgun weddings are so common nobody’s bothered. They think virgin

brides must be frigid; but *my* parents will die of shame. I mean, you haven't met them. I've never even *mentioned* having a boyfriend. I want an *abortion*!

RICHARD: All right, all right. Calm down. Sit down ... Please listen to me, Caroline. I do love you. I know we didn't plan this but now that it's happened let's discuss what to do like a couple of well-educated young people.

CAROLINE: So? I'm listening.

RICHARD: Next time we make love, I'll be sober as a judge, not pissed as a newt. Next time we make love, we'll be man and wife. After my Masters I'll get a job for a couple of years or so, before I tackle my PhD. We'll get married this Christmas; you'll have the baby during the long vac, and by October we can arrange for a nursery or something so you can complete your BA. Isn't that the sensible way to do things?

CAROLINE: I'm too young to have a baby and I don't want to tell my parents.

RICHARD: *We'll* tell them. Together! I'll be right by your side.

CAROLINE: No! You don't know them. You're loving and sweet, Richard, but you don't understand the iron rule of the upper middle class. Appearances are the only reality! This could literally kill my mother. I must just go and have an abortion. It's been legal since April, and one of the grounds is if the *mother* is at risk of becoming a mental or physical wreck. I can convince any doctor of that.

RICHARD: Don't I have any say in the matter?

CAROLINE: Since you ask, No. It's my body: and *my* decision.

RICHARD: Look; it's Friday. Let's get on the bus this afternoon and see your parents. Send them a telegram saying you're coming home tonight, with your fiancé. That should put them in a good mood and when we've told them how much we love each other we can drop the bombshell. They won't like it but they'll be so pleased we're doing the right thing they'll grin and bear it; and after a night at their place we'll go and see *my* folks. They'll just love you.

CAROLINE: Don't count on that from *my* parents ... All right then. I suppose the thought of an abortion isn't very pleasant; so, in for a penny ... We'll go and see Mummy and Daddy. But you need to know they always hoped I'd marry the boy next door. He's very sweet on me.

RICHARD: What's he got that I haven't got?

CAROLINE: There's not a lot to choose between you in terms of looks; but his parents are rich.

RICHARD: Now there's an interesting dilemma for you! I'll just have to become a rich and famous playwright. It might take forty years ...

CAROLINE: ... forty years? I can't wait forty years.

RICHARD: Right then; get your coat on and let's go and send that telegram.

*Go to black. [The suggested musical bridge is the famous song about love and marriage going together like a horse and carriage.]*

*As the lights come up it is a few days later. Caroline is sitting on her bed and Richard is sitting on a chair. Her face is tear-stained. He is looking very glum.*

RICHARD: Okay, it was a lousy idea. But how could I have helped it?

CAROLINE: You weren't even trying.

RICHARD: I was trying very hard, and we did seem to get off on the right foot. True: your mother *did* collapse, but before then they seemed to like me. Your father was even saying he was wishing now *he'd* gone to university.

CAROLINE: Then he asked what your salary would be as an academic and you didn't have a clue; and when Mummy asked where we were going to live it was obvious you were flannelling.

RICHARD: That wasn't the real disaster.

CAROLINE: You're right! When Mummy asked if you were in the YCs, instead of saying something bland you had to brag they wouldn't have you, not after Grosvenor Square. That was the *real* disaster!

RICHARD: But how can anyone believe the Americans should be dropping napalm on innocent civilians? Surely I couldn't stay silent?

CAROLINE: Of course you could! But you're far too clever to do that.

RICHARD: How often do I have to say sorry?

CAROLINE: More often than you've managed so far.

RICHARD: Right then! I am truly sorry I got on your father's wick. I am genuinely sorry your mother was disappointed in her future son-in-

law. I heard her saying to you “David would have been so much more suitable.” Don’t deny it.

CAROLINE: Why should I? She’s entitled to her point of view. Maybe she’s even right. Besides, you can’t exactly say I cut the mustard with *your* family, can you?

RICHARD: You can’t judge everyone by Uncle Ted. It was just unfortunate he was there.

CAROLINE: And he was there when we left too, still grumbling away about how he had every right to speak his mind, it was a free country and on and on, with your mother going “Shush Ted” every five seconds.

RICHARD: All right but *we* are not our parents; we’re *us*, and we’re going to get married in three weeks time.

CAROLINE: I don’t think so. Not now.

RICHARD: What!

CAROLINE: I’m sorry, Dickey Bird, but I don’t love you, leastways not enough to marry you.

RICHARD: But we’ve made all the arrangements. We’ve told *everybody*! We’ll look such fools. We love each other.

CAROLINE: Maybe you love me, but electing me a member of the pudding club doesn’t prove a thing and, besides, I’m not at all sure that I really love you enough to take on your family as well. (*Caroline stands up.*) I think I’d like you to go now.

RICHARD: What in the hell *is* this? We *have* to get married. We’re going to have a baby!

*Richard stands up and makes as if to embrace her. Caroline starts to push him away.*

CAROLINE: I’m having the baby, not *we*! And *I’ve* decided I don’t need to get married; least of all to you. I’ve asked you to go.

*Richard seizes hold of Caroline’s arms and starts to shake her.*

RICHARD: I’m not going till I’ve had a proper explanation. Why are you acting like this? What’s changed all of a sudden?

CAROLINE: I’ve changed my mind; and it’s none of your business why.

RICHARD: Bitch!

*Caroline breaks free of his grasp and slaps him hard. He retaliates by giving her a shove. She staggers back and falls on the floor.*

RICHARD: Oh Caro, I'm so sorry. Are you all right? (*He kneels beside her.*) Please tell me you're all right.

CAROLINE (*weakly*): Leave me! Just go, go now, go away and don't come back. I *never* want to see you again.

*Richard looks down at her.*

RICHARD: Well I want to see *you*. Again and again and again.

*He pauses for a second then stands and exits. Go to black. [The musical bridge is Joyce Grenfell singing "I'm going to see you today"].*

*As the lights come up, it's 1988. Caroline's flat is tidier, and smarter, with an IBM 'golf ball' typewriter on her table. By contrast, Richard's flat is now less tidy with newspapers and magazines scattered and odd items of clothing. Caroline, wearing a pair of designer glasses, is sitting on her sofa reading Interiors.*

RICHARD (*offstage*): Hello! I'm here!

*He enters carrying a bundle of dry-cleaning.*

CAROLINE: Darling, you're early! I haven't even *started* dinner. I'm afraid it'll be more of a midnight feast at the rate I'm going.

RICHARD: I picked up your dry-cleaning; as requested. (*He heads offstage, speaking as he exits.*) How was your day?

CAROLINE: Frantic! But we've put the Christmas issue to bed and next week I'm hoping to have January wrapped up. We've just booked some wonderful travel advertising and I'll need articles written about Mauritius, even if I have to go there myself.

RICHARD (*returning*): You haven't made the bed since this morning.

CAROLINE: Quite the little housewife, aren't you! Come here.

*He sits beside her. They kiss.*

RICHARD: By the way, I hope these are yours, or I'll have some real explaining to do.

*He draws a pair of tights out his jacket pocket and then an earring from his breast pocket.*

CAROLINE: Where did you find these?

RICHARD: Under a cushion in the study. I have a vague memory of peeling the tights off but I don't think I insisted you remove your earrings.

CAROLINE: I'd hate to think we had to confine love-making to *this* flat, just because you occasionally need to tidy up after me ...

RICHARD: ... which I have to do in both places ...

CAROLINE: ... on the other hand, might there not be advantages in having only one address. Then you wouldn't be at risk of being misunderstood if you had an accident, or were arrested and had to turn out your pockets.

RICHARD: There's a grain of *something* in what you say, but is it truth?

CAROLINE: Darling! Please don't talk that way. Take me more seriously. Why don't you just move *in* here?

RICHARD: Sitting here with my arms round you, and my libido slowly coming to the boil, that could seem like a very attractive idea.

CAROLINE: Then seal the bargain with a kiss and move in tonight.

RICHARD: Hold on, hold on! I wouldn't want to argue who is happier but I do know which of us is getting on with her writing career and which one has hit a writer's block.

CAROLINE: You've been so helpful; the least I can do is go out of my way to make it easy for you here. The spare bedroom can be your study and if you hang up a 'do not disturb' notice I'll respect that – except in an emergency.

RICHARD: The House Committee might need to agree what exactly constitutes an emergency. Picture the moment. I'm struggling to work out how to end the scene that's crucial to the play. All of a sudden, you can't find your Chanel handbag. You're running late, and the 'do' might mean a chance to talk with a potentially *huge* advertiser. Would you respect the notice?

CAROLINE: That's a purely hypothetical question.

RICHARD: Darling, it happened last Friday round at *my* flat!

CAROLINE: That just *proves* you need to move in here. You'd be left to yourself and we can set the phone to go straight onto answering so you wouldn't even hear it ring ... Of course you'd need to call me

a couple of times during the day to check I hadn't been trying to reach you and pass on my messages.

RICHARD (*unconvinced*): Yes?

CAROLINE: And you're actually a much better cook and shopper than me so if you were *here* during the day we wouldn't need to eat out so often, which would be a real money-saver.

RICHARD: Except of course when you have a restaurant review, which is never less than once a week; and it's beginning to mean a trek out into the Home Counties, and even an overnight.

CAROLINE: But it's fun! And we're together!

RICHARD: Sweetheart, of course it's fun; and I'm happy we're together but when I tried to persuade you to come with me to Richmond for a first night, you said Richmond was the back of beyond and, what's more, you didn't fancy going on the Tube so we had to drive and the parking there was awful.

CAROLINE: All of which is true. But anyway, it can't have been such a good play. It folded after only two weeks.

RICHARD: One learns from mistakes, even other people's mistakes.

CAROLINE: So, is *this* a mistake and are you taking notes so you can work me into a play?

RICHARD (*after a slight pause*): Possibly; but I do love you, Caroline. Maybe I've always loved you. And if I'm completely honest, it could even be that you're not only the inspiration for all I write but often enough you're one of the characters.

CAROLINE: Thank you for that (*beat*); now move in tonight and I'll inspire you to write your finest work ever.

RICHARD: I'll stay tonight darling, but I really think I'm the sort of writer who needs to feel completely alone to let the juices flow. You know that *wunderkind* novelist I can't stand? He goes off every morning to an office with a brick wall for a view. It's a job. It's work.

CAROLINE: We could hire a daily; but I would have to do the choosing. No slim Filipino or tempting Thai, in fact Oriental is out altogether.

*The Trimphone in Richard's flat starts ringing.*

RICHARD: Let's sleep on it – and if you're hungry afterwards I'll phone up for a pizza.

*Leading him by his tie, Caroline pretends to drag him into the bedroom. Richard's answering machine cuts in.*

RICHARD'S ANS. M/C: "This is Richard Morrison. I'm unable to take your call at present but if you would be kind enough to leave me a message plus your name and a contact telephone number then I'll get back to you in due course. Please speak after the tone."

*The tone sounds; there is a pause and then an unhappy young voice speaks. "Dad? Where are you? I need you. Now!" The phone is hung up and a red light begins to flash. The lights dim on stage. [The bridging music might be "Oh, my papa, to me you were so wonderful."]*

*As the lights come up again, Richard enters his flat and sees the red light flashing. With no haste, he presses the button to replay his messages.*

RICHARD: I wonder what you want this time, Hamish?

*He hears "Dad? Where are you? I need you. Now!"*

RICHARD: Bloody hell.

*He exits to the kitchen and we hear bottles and glasses chinking and water being poured. His door bell sounds, frantically and a cross Richard, full glass in hand, comes out of the kitchen and heads for the door.*

RICHARD: Coming, coming! Get your finger off the bloody bell.

*He exits into the hallway and we hear his door opening.*

RICHARD (offstage): Oh my God, oh my God! What's the matter?

*Go to black. [The bridging music is again "O my papa".]*

*As the lights come up again, there's a rucksack on the sofa in Richard's flat and, centre stage, a park bench facing downstage. Richard is sitting on the bench. After a pause, Caroline enters downstage and rushes up to the bench.*

CAROLINE: My darling, what's the matter? You look dreadful. I left message after message. Why do we have to meet here? Never mind, it's a lovely day and I've got wonderful news. Guess what! (Richard simply shakes his head and sighs.) All right, I'll tell you. Lifestyle TV have asked me if I'll front a series for afternoon

television; a whole hour, five afternoons a week! What they have in mind is three segments featuring décor and furnishing; cooking and entertaining; and then fashion. Isn't that wonderful?

RICHARD: I suppose so.

CAROLINE: Suppose? It's not a supposition, dear; it's a proposition and if it comes off I'm going to be fearfully busy. I'll need to depend on you more and more for domestic support.

RICHARD: I may not be dependable. It all depends.

CAROLINE: What's that supposed to mean? Aren't you pleased for me? What's biting you? You really have gone off song, Dickey Bird.

RICHARD: Don't call me that! Don't *ever* call me that!

CAROLINE: I'm sorry. I was trying to be jolly and loving and to share my wonderful news with you. Maybe you'd better share what's biting you; but don't bite *me* in case it's infectious.

RICHARD: You insensitive, selfish bitch!

*Caroline jumps up and starts to leave.*

CAROLINE: When you've come to your senses and apologised, we can continue this conversation but, just for the moment, it doesn't seem like I'm welcome here. Will I see you tonight?

RICHARD: I'm busy ... for the next six months at least.

CAROLINE: What! Richard, I demand some sort of explanation. Are you seeing someone else?

RICHARD: Yes!

CAROLINE: I demand to know who.

*They're both standing now, glaring at each other. Richard struggles to speak.*

RICHARD: My son ... Dick.

CAROLINE: Dick is here! But isn't that what you've been wanting for months if not years. That's wonderful news. When can I meet him?

RICHARD: Not right now; he's in a bit of a state.

CAROLINE: Oh no! What's the matter? (*There is a long pause.*)  
Well?

RICHARD (*in a very flat tone*): He had a fight with Ramon when he found them in bed with Jenny.

CAROLINE: Is that so terrible. Come on; he's young, he'll get over it.

RICHARD: It may take a while. It was his mother who threw him out.

CAROLINE: How selfish of her. But listen Richard, we need to buck him up, and soon. We're recording the pilot tomorrow and I need you to listen out for calls from a couple of people. It's important!

RICHARD: Here we go again! It's all about *you*. What about me and Dick?

CAROLINE: Where's he going to stay?

RICHARD: With me, of course. I'd like you to come over and meet him.

CAROLINE: Couldn't he just stay at your place and look after it for a while so you can still move in with me?

RICHARD (*shaking his head*): I want to give him some TLC and do some real father-son bonding. The sort of thing he's been lacking lately.

CAROLINE: Of course you do, but if you're going to use my spare room as a study, there wouldn't be a bed for Dick – and, after all, you wouldn't want him walking in on *us*; not after what you just told me.

RICHARD: I don't think you're hearing what you're saying. It's all me, me, me! Nothing about Dick, or me for that matter! Maybe Dick's turned up in the nick of time.

CAROLINE: What are you saying? That sounds suspiciously like you're wanting to give *me* the heave. Are you saying our relationship is past its 'sell by' date?

RICHARD: I think I'm past my 'use by' date. I'm not really keen on being your housekeeper.

CAROLINE: That's despicable! You were the one who came looking for *me*.

RICHARD: All I'm asking is for time to look after Dick.

CAROLINE: And how long does that take, for God's sake? A week; a fortnight?

RICHARD: Months! How should I know?

CAROLINE: You've been helping me all this time and now you want to abandon me; just when ...

RICHARD: Just when my son *needs* me, more than ...

CAROLINE: ... more than I do? Then you'd better run home and change his nappy. As they say in your world, Richard, don't call me – and I very much doubt if I'll call you. Twice bitten now; I reckon I'd better shy away from you.

RICHARD: Cliché!

CAROLINE: Bastard!

RICHARD: It takes one to know one.

*They square up to each other then Caroline turns and runs off. Richard stretches his arms after her and then slowly lets them fall. Fade to black.*

*Now it's January 1969. In both their study-bedrooms, the beds have been stripped and the shelves are bare. After a moment for those changes to register, Richard enters from the right, wearing a coat and carrying a duffel bag. At the same time, Caroline enters from the left, in a coat and hat, and carrying a small suitcase.*

RICHARD: Caroline! I'm sorry. I'm not waylaying you. It's just that I'm heading for the bus. You know I've been sent down. How are you?

CAROLINE: I'm on the mend, thanks. What did the Dean have to say?

RICHARD: He said they might have overlooked our domestic tiff, despite the grave consequences, but the fact that the police have finally decided to charge me with riotous assembly in Grosvenor Square makes it clear that I'm not a suitable candidate for a Masters degree at this university.

CAROLINE: I'm sorry.

RICHARD: But where are *you* going?

CAROLINE: Home. I've arranged to take a year out, but I'm not even sure I want to come back. Not here anyway.

RICHARD: I'm sorry. What are you going to do?

CAROLINE: I might try writing more restaurant reviews.

RICHARD: I can't help feeling this is all my fault.

CAROLINE: It probably isn't *all* your fault, but I'm the one who's going to have to live with the consequences. The doctor says I may have difficulty having any more children.

RICHARD: Oh Jesus, no! What can I say? I did so want to marry you.

CAROLINE: Please don't start that again.

RICHARD: No, of course not, sorry, sorry.

CAROLINE: So what are *you* going to do now?

RICHARD: I'm going to try and write for a living too. Not restaurant reviews, though.

CAROLINE: Plays?

RICHARD: Anything and everything that involves words and language. I still have hopes for my modern *Manon Lescaut*. And I've applied for a few jobs.

CAROLINE: Best of luck then. I'll look out for your name in lights.

RICHARD: How are you getting home?

CAROLINE (*hesitating slightly*): By car ... David has come for me.

RICHARD: The boy next door?

CAROLINE: Yes. He's waiting for me in the car park.

RICHARD: Better be careful. You might wind up married to him.

CAROLINE: Who knows! Now he's got his ACA, Daddy has asked him to join the firm,.

RICHARD: I needn't ask if he's accepted.

CAROLINE: And by the way, he doesn't know anything about ... well you know. He doesn't know a thing.

RICHARD: I'm hardly likely to tell him. But I'd better not offer to carry your suitcase round to the car park. I might miss my bus.

CAROLINE: I think we both missed the bus.

RICHARD: Yes, quite. Well, *au revoir*, Caroline.

CAROLINE: Goodbye, Richard.

*They shake hands awkwardly and pick up their bag and suitcase, then walk off in opposite directions. There is a verse of the Harrow school song. The lights fade slowly as the song is sung.*

*“Forty years on, when afar and asunder / Parted are those who are singing today, / When you look back, and forgetfully wonder / What you were like in your work and your play, / Then, it may be, there will often come o’er you, / Glimpses of notes like the catch of a song – / Visions of boyhood shall float them before you, / Echoes of dreamland shall bear them along,”*

*As the light come up it is October 2008. Richard is seated at a restaurant table and there are two other small tables upstage left and right of his. He’s already had plenty to drink. Caroline enters and Richard lurches to his feet.*

RICHARD: Aha! The late Caroline Roth! Welcome to my lonely table. What’ll you have? There’s fish, fish or fish. I recommend the fish.

CAROLINE: Sorry, Richard, but I think you’ll feel the wait was worthwhile.

CAROLINE: I’ll try. You remember that call I had in your flat?

RICHARD: The mystery call that made you do a runner?

CAROLINE: I’ll forgive that dig. Just listen a moment.

RICHARD: Silent as the tomb!

*The 1968 Richard and Caroline enter unnoticed and sit at one of the other tables.*

CAROLINE: You needn’t be that quiet. Just don’t fall asleep ... Right! The call was from my PA to say that Lifestyle TV had been offered the chance to produce a new reality TV show format that has already been sold to Channel Four but the thing is the American owners of the rights have just had a mega-bust-up with the production company who *were* going to make it and so there was a bit of a crisis, given advertisers were already signed up and the first show was planned to go out in only four months time.

RICHARD: You’re going too fast for my small brain! What’s it called?

CAROLINE: “Ten Little Businessmen.”

RICHARD: And do nine of them get murdered one by one? I'd certainly watch that, and so would all my old *Socialist Worker* friends.

CAROLINE: No businessmen will suffer during the making of this series! Well, nothing worse than humiliation.

RICHARD: Pity!

CAROLINE: No, seriously, my dear; it's a tried and tested formula and I know Roth Productions can do it, but I had to dash off and pitch to the owners who happened to be in Ireland looking up their ancestors.

RICHARD: So how did it go?

CAROLINE: We signed the contract and the sponsors have given their okay.

*The 1988 Richard and Caroline enter silently unnoticed and sit at the third table.*

RICHARD: Meaning what, exactly?

CAROLINE: Meaning I seem to be coming out of all this smelling rather more of rose than fertiliser.

RICHARD: Your financial troubles are over?

CAROLINE: Not entirely.

RICHARD: Now what?

CAROLINE: Roth Productions may have hit pay dirt but I've just heard from Max. The broker he used to invest the money he got out of Lehman's just in time has just been arrested for grand larceny: someone called Bernard Madoff.

RICHARD: Can you survive the hit?

CAROLINE: A week ago, I couldn't have been sure, but now, everything is going to be fine, especially if you'll do one thing for me. One little thing!

RICHARD: Always willing to oblige.

CAROLINE: Since it's a leap year, marry me please. This time round let's actually get married. Third time lucky!

RICHARD: Ignoring the cliché, are you serious?

CAROLINE: Deadly serious.

RICHARD: Okay then: let's spend the rest of our lives together laughing about all this. I propose a toast! (*He stands and speaks loudly*) To Caroline and Richard; the happy couple at long last! (*As Richard raises his glass and sinks its entire contents, the other two couples raise their glasses. Richard sings*) "We've been together now for forty years." (*Suddenly he looks ill and clasps his chest.*)

CAROLINE (*going to his aid*): Richard!!

*The other two couples look aghast and advance slowly.*

RICHARD: I think I've rather overdone things and, (*he paws at his pockets*) I've left my pills at home. I don't feel well; not at all well. Please: take me home.

*Richard collapses and the other couples move closer.*

CAROLINE: Richard, my darling. It isn't meant to end like this!

*The other Carolines turn away and are embraced comfortingly by the other Richards.*

RICHARD (*weakly*): How the hell do you know? I'm the bloody playwright!

*The final awesome descending scale of Mahler's second symphony rings down the curtain – followed immediately by the strains of "Smoke gets in your eyes" as the cast take their curtain calls.*

THE END