Synopsis

Act One: Restaurant. Saturday night

Marlene hosts a dinner party in a London restaurant to celebrate her promotion to managing director of ‘Top Girls’ employment agency. Her five guests are women from the past. In order of arrival they are Isabella Bird (1831–1904), who lived in Edinburgh and travelled abroad extensively between the ages of forty and seventy; Lady Nijo (b. 1258), Japanese, who was an Emperor’s courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan; Dull Gret, who is the subject of the Brueghel painting *Dulle Griet*, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils; Pope Joan, who, disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854–856; and, arriving late, Patient Griselda, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Marlene orders a bottle of wine from the waitress who proceeds to serve the dinner during the scene without speaking at all. On their arrival and throughout the meal the guests recount their individual histories, picking up on each other, interrupting and overlapping. Marlene acts as hostess, ordering courses, drawing out her guests and adding her own comments to the individual stories. This long opening scene, lasting some forty minutes in performance, is one of continuous excited conversation. The orchestration of the dialogue provides climaxes of horror and dismay, humour and celebration. For convenience the lives and stories may be recounted separately, but it is essential to appreciate how the force and energy of the scene is derived from the interconnected structure of the dialogue. It is an extremely challenging scene for practitioners – actors and director – who must find the rhythm in performance to ensure not only that the meal is served and eaten without distracting from the dialogue, but that the guests, however distinctively different, become a chorus communicating more than their individual stories.
Isabella Bird
The daughter of a Church of England clergyman, she moved to live in Scotland. She tried to please her father by conforming to the ‘role’ of clergyman’s daughter, engaging in needlework, music and charitable schemes. She suffered a tumour of the spine and studied poetry, Latin and hymnology. However, she grew to prefer practical things – manual work, cooking, washing, mending, riding horses and a rough open-air life. At forty she was sent to Australia for the good of her health. She found the country hideous, but then she loathed the constant murk and dismal houses of home. She thought her life was over. However, she was greatly cheered and excited travelling from Australia to the Sandwich Islands. She fell in love with the sea. Conditions were awful on board but she felt completely liberated, discovering ‘a new world’. She grieved at her father’s death, but soon forgot her Latin, and theology made her head ache. She always travelled as a lady and repudiated any suggestion that she was other than feminine. She was admired by a Mr Nugent – Rocky Mountain Jim – who proposed to her because she could both make scones and lasso cattle. He was, unfortunately, unacceptable as a husband. On her return to England she had a vision of him in his trapper’s clothes; it was on the day he died with a bullet in his brain. She had felt a yearning to ‘save’ Jim Nugent, but the real loves of her life were her sister Hennie and the husband she did marry, Dr John Bishop, who had cared for Hennie during her last fatal illness. She married at fifty, and although Dr Bishop had a ‘sweet character’ she found married life a drudgery and she fell ill again. When her husband died she determined to leave grief behind and set off for Tibet where, despite suffering from an agonising spine and in face of harsh difficulties, she had great adventures. She always felt dull when stationary. Her memories include being nearly murdered by a howling mob in China, and the little Indian bay mare she rode in the Rocky Mountains. She always suffered guilt on returning to England because she felt her life abroad to be one of self-gratification, so she hurled herself into committee work and wore herself out with good causes. She never left her husband while married but she resented all she had to do in domestic and social work. She declares, ‘I cannot and will not live the life of a lady . . . Why should I? Why should I?’ At seventy she visited Morocco, although very ill, and she was the first European woman ever to see the Emperor. It was only a temporary return of vigour ‘but how marvellous while it lasted’.
Lady Nijo

Nijo tells a story of a life of two halves, first at Court and later, in obedience to her father’s wish, as a vagrant Buddhist nun. ‘The first half of my life was all sin and the second all repentance.’ At fourteen she was one of the maidens passing the sake at Court when the Emperor (aged twenty-nine) told her father to send Nijo to him. He sent her an eight-layered gown which she sent back, not understanding its meaning. She was distressed when the time came, but soon became reconciled to her role – it was what she had been brought up for – and was sad if the Emperor stayed away. She never enjoyed taking other women to him, which was also part of her role. Nijo came from a line of eight generations of poets; her father was a religious man and a poet. He instructed her to ‘serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders’. When her father died she had only His Majesty and when she fell from favour she had nothing. She adopted religion as a kind of nothing, as if she were dead already. As a nun she travelled the country on foot – she walked every day for twenty years – following the tradition of priests, who were often vagrants. Her travels revealed a determined spirit, full of hope and relishing new sights. One of her lovers was a priest, Ariake. He ‘dedicated his life to her’ when he came to her and knew he would fall into ‘one of three lower realms’ when he died. ‘Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me.’ Nijo believed at first that the Emperor was of sweet character because he did not mind about Ariake, but really this was because he no longer cared for her. One night he even sent her to a man who had been pursuing her and listened to their lovemaking from behind the screens. She depended on the Emperor’s favour. When she incurred the Empress’s displeasure, who claimed that Nijo had no right to wear three-layered gowns, it was explained that she was the adopted daughter of her grandfather, the Prime Minister, and had been granted permission to wear thin silk. She remembers having some babies, often in embarrassing situations, but she always avoided scandal. Her first child was His Majesty’s, which died, and her second was Akebono’s. She was seventeen and he had loved her since she was thirteen. He was upset when she had to go to the Emperor, and wrote a lot of poems to her. It was very romantic. When she became pregnant by Akebono she hid the fact from the Emperor. Akebono helped at the birth and took the baby away. It was ‘only a girl but I was sorry to lose it’. She saw her daughter once, three years later; Akebono’s wife had adopted the child who was being brought up to be sent to the
palace, as Nijo had been. Her third child was the son of Ariake the priest, and she never saw the baby after it was born. Her fourth was also the priest’s child, but Ariake died before the birth and she stayed alone in the hills not wanting to see anyone. She felt nothing for the child.

Nijo shows considerable interest in Griselda’s story, which has many parallels, and cries at the memory that she did not get her children back, unlike Griselda. Other painful events in her life were the deaths of her father and the Emperor. She was not allowed to see the Emperor when he was dying so she hid in the room with his coffin. Then she couldn’t find her shoes and had to chase the funeral in bare feet, arriving late, when all that was left was a few wisps of smoke in the sky. She is deeply anxious and concerned to know whether, if she had still been allowed at Court, she would have been permitted ‘to wear full mourning’.

Nijo remembers an incident that made her particularly angry. She was eighteen. At the Full Moon Ceremony the men make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks. They then beat their women across the loins so that they will bear sons, not daughters. The Emperor beat them hard, which was not exceptional, but on this occasion he allowed the attendants to beat them too. In response the ladies devised a plan to attack the Emperor and beat him in return. Nijo beat him with a stick until he promised he would not order anybody to hit them again. There was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. That she had beaten the Emperor with a stick is Nijo’s last, exultant, memory.

_Dull Gret_

Gret makes an early entrance and remains a powerful physical presence throughout the scene but says little until the end. She is more preoccupied with the table and the meal than any of the other guests, being a stranger to sophisticated surroundings. She eats crudely and steals bottles and plates when no one is looking, putting these in her large apron. Her rare monosyllabic interjections are coarse, reductive and amusing and her relative silence adds an element of suspense up to the point when she delivers her climactic, inspirational story derived from the surrealistic painting by Brueghel.

She describes coming to hell through a big mouth and finding it – all black and red – very similar to her own village after it had been fired and looted by soldiers. Surrounded by devils, including one who showered her and her neighbours with money scooped from his
arse, and strange and horrible creatures, she set about beating and fighting these devils. The women were unstoppable. They had known worse than these devils in the form of the Spanish invaders who had slaughtered their families. Gret had lost her eldest son and her baby, killed by soldiers. Finally she could stand no more and shouted to her neighbours, ‘Come on, we’re going where the evil comes from and pay the bastards out.’ They followed her, in aprons and ordinary clothes, and as they pushed down the street the ground opened up to reveal a big mouth. Gret, waving a sword, led her women, running and fighting, through the mouth into ‘a street just like ours but in hell’, and gave the devils a beating.

**Pope Joan**

Joan was an infant prodigy, excited from the age of ten by theology, metaphysics and the teachings of John the Scot. She was always more concerned with knowledge than with active Christianity; she was not a missionary, not concerned to convert. She left home at the age of twelve, dressed as a boy, with a sixteen-year-old friend. She left because, being female, she was denied access to the library. The two wanted to study in Athens. She went undiscovered and was recognised as very clever. She slept with her friend in a lodging house and nursed him when he fell ill until he died — arguing all the time over the beliefs of famous theologians. She decided to stay a man and devote her life to learning. She went to Rome because Italian men didn’t have beards. She studied, obsessed with the pursuit of truth, and taught at the Greek School in Rome. She worked hard and became famous as a speaker when still young. When she was made a Cardinal she fell ill — ‘full of terror and regret’ — but she recovered and studied in pursuit of the absolute. When Pope Leo died she was elected. She believed she would know God because he would speak to her directly. But He didn’t, knowing she was a woman. She eventually took another lover — a chamberlain who was very discreet. She enjoyed being Pope, consecrating bishops and receiving royalty. When there were natural disasters, however, such as earthquakes or plagues, she felt personally responsible. She might have survived happily and successfully were it not for her baby. Here she was finally exposed as a woman and ‘Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope’. She hardly knew what was happening during her pregnancy, not being fully conscious of a woman’s body, but the chamberlain knew the truth. There was, of course, no question of an abortion and she didn’t realise when the baby was due. Her baby was eventually born
during the procession of all the Roman clergy on Rogation Day. She experienced labour pains, spasms, contractions and loss of breath. She realised what was happening but couldn’t do anything about it. The people thought that she, the Pope, was ill but the baby just slid out on to the road. One Cardinal cried ‘The Antichrist!’ and fainted. Joan was taken by the feet, dragged out of town, and stoned to death. The baby was also killed. Later the procession always avoided the street journeyed through on the fateful day. The clergy introduced a pierced marble chair in the Chapel of the Saviour to confirm the sex of the Pope. Two clergymen made sure he was a man while the Pope retained his public dignity.

Joan drinks steadily throughout the meal and is quite drunk by the end when she begins to recite Lucretius in Latin before being thoroughly sick.

Griselda
Griselda arrives late and at the most embarrassing possible moment for her. All the guests are drunk and laughing, hugely enjoying the ludicrous idea of the Pope’s ‘pierced chair’, and Gret shouting ‘Balls!’. She is diffident, apologetic and orders only cheese and biscuits to eat. Marlene introduces her as famed for an extraordinary marriage recorded by Boccaccio, Petrarch and Chaucer. Her story begins with her marriage.

The daughter of a peasant, Griselda had been spotted for her beauty by the ruling marquis, Walter, when she was fifteen. On the day of his wedding no one knew whom he was to marry, but the procession stopped at her home and he spoke to her father. He had selected Griselda to be his bride. She could refuse, but if she accepted the one condition was that she would always obey him in everything. Ladies dressed her in a white silk dress and put jewels in her hair. At first Walter was kind, but when her first child, a daughter, was six weeks old Walter explained that the people were becoming restless because of her privileged marriage and so he had to remove the child to keep them quiet. She obediently gave up the child, asking only that she be buried where no animals could dig her up. It was Walter’s child, to do with as he liked. She never spoke about what had happened and continued to live happily with Walter. After four years she had a son, and two years later Walter again said that the people were angry that their heir was a peasant’s grandson. Griselda believed that when he took her children it was to test her love for him, but ‘it was always easy because I always knew I would do what he said’.
Twelve years later she was tested again. Walter decided he must marry someone who could give him an acceptable heir. Griselda was sent home, barefoot and dressed only in a slip. Her father and everyone else were crying but she was perfectly content. Quite soon afterwards she was sent for again, to prepare his wedding to a young girl from France – a beautiful girl of sixteen who had her younger brother with her as a page. The guests entered for the feast but Walter stayed behind and put his arms around Griselda and kissed her. She felt half asleep with shock, and he said, ‘This is your daughter and your son.’ Griselda fainted, then cried and kissed her children. She was dressed in a cloth of gold and lived happily with Walter who had ‘suffered so much all those years’.

The guests react with amazement at Griselda’s remarkable story but Marlene follows it with a particularly scathing commentary on Walter. Eventually, following Nijo’s story of the attack on the Emperor, even Griselda begins to rethink – ‘I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to.’

**Act Two, Scene One: Joyce’s back yard – Sunday afternoon**

The scene is Joyce’s back yard. Squashed together in a shelter made of junk are Angie, who is sixteen, and Kit, who is twelve. The girls are hiding from Joyce (who appears to be Angie’s mother) and ignore her calls from the house. Angie’s disturbed animosity towards Joyce (‘Wish she was dead’) is reflected in her bullying of the younger Kit. She frightens Kit with stories of making pictures fall from the wall and hearing a dead kitten they know about; she accuses her of being timid, of being sexually ignorant, and her mother of being a slag. This clearly spills over from her unsatisfactory life with Joyce (‘I’m going to kill my mother and you’re going to watch’ . . . ‘If I don’t get away from here I’m going to die’). They continue to ignore Joyce when she offers them a cup of tea and a biscuit. Kit, obviously fond of Angie, confides her fears of a possible war. Angie wants to go to London to see her aunt who is ‘special’ and ‘gets people jobs’ – thus establishing a possible connection with Marlene. She says that Joyce hates her aunt and, intriguingly, ‘I think I’m my aunt’s child. I think my mother’s really my aunt.’ The girls cuddle each other for comfort. Joyce comes down to the shelter where she knows the girls are hiding. Kit wants to go to the cinema but Joyce insists that Angie tidies her room first. Angie leaves reluctantly to do so, and Joyce
talks about her concern for Angie to Kit. She sees little chance of her getting work when jobs are hard to get. ‘She’s one of those girls who might never leave home.’ It worries Joyce that Angie plays with children much younger than herself, but she resents the suggestion that she is ‘simple’. She is ‘clever in her own way’ and ‘always kind to little children’. Kit is a confident young girl, conscious that she is clever. She mentions the possibility of becoming a nuclear physicist. Angie returns wearing an old best dress, slightly small for her. This inexplicable change of clothes irritates Joyce even more and she is yet more insistent that Angie cleans her room before anything else. Angie picks up a brick. When it begins to rain Joyce’s harassment is compounded. She and Kit run into the house; Angie stays out in the rain. When Kit returns to fetch her in Angie says, ‘I put on this dress to kill my mother.’

**Act Two, Scene Two: ‘Top Girls’ Employment Agency – Monday morning**

The scene moves from a main office area to a small interviewing area and back again – the changes defined in the theatre by lighting. Win and Nell have arrived at the ‘Top Girls’ Employment Agency on Monday morning. They drink coffee and discuss the weekend. Win has spent the weekend with a man at his home in West Sussex while his wife was away. Nell has been with two different men but won’t be drawn to discuss her private life in detail. One of the men, Derek, has asked her again to marry him but she doesn’t want to be tied down, ‘to play house’. She prefers to work. They consider the position in the office now that Marlene has been promoted to Managing Director. Howard Kidd is upset because a woman has got the job he considered was his by right, because he is a man. The likelihood is that he will change his job. Nell would also like a change. She has had plenty of offers but ‘most of them can’t afford me. Or you’ she says to Win. The two discuss their day’s clients and are contemptuous of most of the men whose careers they are concerned with. One prospective client impresses them because her experience suggests she is a ‘tough bird like us’.

Marlene arrives and Win and Nell applaud her promotion. Howard Kidd’s resentment is again mentioned. Nell is dismissive of Win’s secretive affair mentioned earlier (‘Don’t know why you bother’), and she is displeased that Marlene has been promoted rather than her (‘I don’t like coming second’).
Interview: Jeanine and Marlene

Marlene interviews Jeanine and quickly establishes the relevant details concerning her career. She has six ‘O’ level passes and moderate secretarial skills. She could have continued her formal education but preferred to go to work. She started as a typist in a small friendly office where she has progressed to being a secretary, shared by three executives. She earns £100 a week, which Marlene considers ‘not bad’, but she feels that there are limited prospects of advancement. She wants a change of job basically because she needs more money. She is saving to get married. She isn’t wearing an engagement ring because she and her fiancé wanted to save the money. Marlene favours not wearing a ring (‘saves taking it off’). A single woman is a safer prospect to an employer, being less likely to leave to have children, and a ring could signal this possibility. Jeanine mentions advertising as a desirable line of work and is not very impressed when Marlene offers one job in a ‘knitwear’ marketing department and another at a promising concern selling ‘lampshades’. Both are advances on her present position but they are evidently too mundane for Jeanine. She has a hazy notion of a job involving travelling, but no sense of a career structure (‘I can’t think about ten years’). Marlene strongly encourages her to go for one of the recommended jobs.

The scene shows Marlene at work. She wastes no time. She very quickly establishes what she needs to know about Jeanine in a professional context and smoothly moves her on. Jeanine has no focused ambition and Marlene, sensing her limitations, forcefully convinces her that the jobs she recommends are very worthwhile.

Interview: Louise and Win

Win’s questions elicit the essential facts about Louise who, in two long speeches, succinctly defines the changing attitude of women to work. She is embarrassed about her age. She is forty-six but claims at first to be in her ‘early forties’. Win acknowledges this is a handicap for women in business but is hopeful that Louise’s experience will count in her favour. She explains that she has worked for the same company for twenty-one years and now wants to make a change. She deeply resents how she is taken for granted. Her mother has died, she has no social life, and she has come to the awful realisation that she is ‘stuck there’, having given her life to the company. She has been in middle management for twenty years and has built up an extremely efficient department. She has trained younger men who have gone on
to higher things. Her work is always perfect and consequently nobody notices her. Now she wants to make them sorry to lose her. She would refuse any offer of more money that the company might make. She has doubts about working with other women and believes that she passes as a man at work. She did take on one younger woman who had excellent qualifications and who progressed to being on the board of a competitor. Louise doesn’t wholly approve of the new style she displayed. The new kind of attractive, well-dressed woman is not as careful as she had always been. They take themselves for granted whereas Louise has ‘had to justify [her] existence every minute’. Win explains that any vacancies would be ones where Louise would be in competition with younger men. She offers one in a cosmetic company – a field easier for a woman – at a salary of £8,500 (less than Louise is currently earning). Louise is not so much concerned about money as about making a change. For her ‘it’s more important to get away’.

The Office
Marlene is working at her desk when Angie enters. Taken by surprise, Marlene does not recognise her at first. We soon make the connection that Angie is Marlene’s niece and Joyce is her sister. Angie has come to London to visit her aunt and, hopefully, to stay with her. Marlene is not enthusiastic about this inconvenience, ‘Unfortunately you’ve picked a day when I’m rather busy, if there’s ever a day when I’m not.’ Angie is overawed by the office and Marlene’s status in it. Marlene explains that she is going to be in charge, and have a new office where ‘there’s just the one big desk in it for me’. Angie is thrilled (‘I knew you’d be in charge of everything’). Marlene is anxious to know how long Angie intends to stay but Angie avoids giving a direct answer. She reminds Marlene of when she came to visit her and Joyce the year before. ‘That was the best day of my whole life,’ she says.

Howard Kidd’s wife enters the office unannounced and is not at first recognised by Marlene. She assumes that Mrs Kidd wants to see her husband, Howard, but in fact she wants to talk to Marlene on a matter of some urgency. She notices Angie, who is introduced and who then retires to an inconspicuous part of the office where she overhears the conversation that ensues but takes no part in it. Mrs Kidd explains that Howard is in a state of shock about not getting the job of Managing Director. He is very upset and hasn’t been able to sleep. The idea of working for a woman has appalled him and he has begun to denounce women in general, including his wife. She has had to take the blame. She has ‘put him first every inch of the way’ and
now she warns Marlene that she will have to be very careful in her handling of him. Marlene listens to all this without much sympathy and, feeling that she is being reproached, she tries to cut the meeting short. She says she will treat Howard fairly and properly, and blames him for ‘taking it out’ on his wife. Mrs Kidd expresses her own, deeply felt opinion that what has happened is wrong. Howard Kidd has a family – a wife and three children – to support and it is only fair that he should have the job. Marlene begins to appreciate the real reason for Mrs Kidd’s visit: that she might be persuaded to give up the job to Howard. She responds briskly and aggressively. She says that Howard has the choice of leaving if he isn’t satisfied, and invites Mrs Kidd to leave. Mrs Kidd loses her self-control and, agreeing with her husband, she accuses Marlene of being ‘one of these ballbreakers . . . You’ll end up miserable and lonely. You’re not natural.’ Marlene tells her to ‘please piss off’, a crude, uncompromising dismissal which leaves Mrs Kidd with no alternative but to go.

Angie has heard this exchange and is immensely impressed by Marlene (‘I think you were wonderful’). Marlene has to do some work and leaves Angie in the office which is ‘where I most want to be in the world’.

Interview: Shona and Nell
Shona appears confident and successful. Nell’s questions elicit that she is twenty-nine (though young-looking), earning a healthy £9,000 annually selling for a company, but would like a change. Nell questions Shona on her attitude to selling and is assured that she has no qualms, no womanly hesitancy about concern for ‘the customer’s needs and his feelings’. Shona is uncompromising: she says ‘I never consider people’s feelings’ and ‘I’m not very nice’. She is interested in selling computers (‘a top field’) or video systems (‘a high-flying situation’) and to the suggested salary of £10,000 to £15,000 and upwards she replies blandly ‘Sounds OK’. The brash confidence of Shona’s replies so impresses Nell, who recognises an equally ambitious career-woman, that she suggests the possibility of working for the ‘Top Girls’ agency sometime in the future (‘We could keep in touch’). Shona is asked to describe her present job and she proceeds to recount a typical day – selling electrical goods in the North of England. Her exotic account of expense-account living – driving a Porsche and staying in sophisticated hotels – gradually exposes her as a fraud. The picture is an unconvincing concoction of advertising clichés and fantasies. Nell says, ‘Not a word of this is true, is it?’.
Shona turns out to be twenty-one and inexperienced – but unabashed when exposed by Nell.

The Office
Returning to the office, Win discovers Angie. Angie would like to work in the office but she has no formal qualifications at all. Asked what she can do she replies, ‘I don’t know. Nothing.’ In response to Angie’s questions we hear Win’s story. She had been headhunted by the ‘Top Girls’ agency who offered her more money than the firm she was working for, so she broke her contract. Her career began with a science degree and working in medical research, but she left to earn more money. She went abroad. She was always successful but, being a woman, her success made her unpopular. She would drink to cheer herself up. She soon discovered that she could do better than any of the men she worked with, who always made their work sound harder than it was. She lived with a man for four years and supported him as he couldn’t get work. She went to California and enjoyed the sunshine and the lifestyle. Then to Mexico, still in ‘sales’, but it wasn’t a suitable country for a single woman, so she came home. She went ‘bonkers’ for a time, thinking she was five different people, but recovered. The psychiatrist told her she was sane and very intelligent. She got married ‘in a moment of weakness’ but her husband has been in prison for the last four years and she doesn’t visit him much any more. Win explains that she prefers working in the employment agency to selling because you can help people. Selling requires aggression and the customers don’t usually want to meet you: ‘It’s no good if you like being liked.’

Nell and then Marlene re-enter the office. Nell reports that Howard Kidd has had a heart attack, but she is unaffected by the news: ‘Lucky he didn’t get the job if that’s what his health’s like,’ she says. Win points to Angie and remarks on her wish to work in the office. Marlene dismisses any chance of future success for Angie: ‘She’s a bit thick. She’s a bit funny . . . she’s not going to make it.’

Act Three: Joyce’s kitchen – Sunday evening, a year earlier
Marlene has come to visit Joyce and Angie. She has brought some presents. Angie, who is very excited, has opened a box of chocolates and unwraps the dress which she had put on in Act Two, Scene One. Joyce has a present of perfume. Angie goes to her room to try on the
new dress. Joyce is unprepared for Marlene’s visit and both sisters
are irritated by the discovery that Angie had invited Marlene without
letting Joyce know. There is a definite prickliness between the two.
When Angie reappears, thrilled about the new dress she is wearing,
she justifies her invitation on the grounds that she hasn’t seen her aunt
for six years.

Kit enters to play with Angie but Angie, enchanted by the presence
of Marlene, won’t go out and Kit leaves alone. Joyce explains that
Kit is like a little sister to Angie. She is the only girl who lives close
to them and Angie is ‘good with little children’. Marlene wonders
if Angie might work with little children but Joyce dismisses the
suggestion (‘She hasn’t an idea in her head what she wants to do’).
Marlene produces a bottle of whisky and, offering Joyce a drink,
remembers the last time they drank together – the night their father
died. Joyce still tends his grave and visits their mother every week.
They discuss local news and Marlene learns that Joyce’s husband
‘moved out’ three years previously. These details add to the sense
of Marlene’s estrangement from her family. Joyce remembers that
Marlene was in America at the time. Angie produces a postcard
which Marlene had sent them. The message gives an image of
Marlene’s life that is far removed from the present situation of drab
domesticity: ‘Driving across the States for a new job in L.A. It’s a long
way but the car goes very fast. It’s very hot.’

Angie’s excitement at Marlene’s visit irritates Joyce who sends
Angie to bed. Marlene is conscious of a deep resentment in Joyce
and this erupts when Marlene says that she has visited their aged
mother that day. Joyce visits their mother every week. Her bitterness
focuses on Marlene’s leaving home: ‘Look, you’ve left, you’ve gone
away,/ we can do without you.’ The fraught situation develops into
a furious argument during which the facts of the past come tumbling
out. Marlene left home to escape the awfulness of her parents’
working-class existence. She got pregnant when seventeen and let
Joyce adopt the child. It seemed at the time that Joyce couldn’t have
children of her own. Angie is now confirmed as Marlene’s daughter.
Joyce later had a miscarriage because she was so exhausted looking
after Marlene’s baby. She hasn’t been able to have any other children.
Marlene has subsequently had two abortions. Eventually Marlene
breaks down in tears and is comforted by Joyce (‘Everyone’s always
crying in his house. Nobody takes any notice’).

They talk about their men. Joyce’s husband, Frank, was thrown
out when he started having an affair with a younger woman (‘He
was always carrying on'). Joyce now has four different cleaning jobs in order to survive. She won’t, however, accept financial help from Marlene. Marlene has always attracted men friends who like to be seen with a ‘high-flying lady’ but she won’t conform to the required role of ‘the little woman’ at home. She prefers adventures and looks forward to the 1980s which she thinks will be stupendous.

The sisters quarrel passionately about the immediate political situation in Britain, holding opposite views about the recent victory of Margaret Thatcher, the new Conservative Prime Minister. For Marlene this signals a new era of opportunity, when monetarist economic policy heralds revival and the individual with drive and initiative can prosper as never before. For Joyce, nothing has significantly changed. She reminds Marlene of the rotten life of their parents who were ‘treated like rubbish’: the mother went hungry and the father worked in the fields like an animal. She defends his domestic violence and his drinking as the inevitable consequence of his oppression. For Joyce ‘nothing’s changed and it won’t with them in’. Marlene despises the working class and Joyce loathes the wealthy people she has to work for. Marlene believes simply that ‘Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes’, and Joyce points to Angie who is ‘stupid, lazy and frightened’ and asks what might be done for people like her. Joyce believes Angie’s life is doomed to waste but Marlene thinks ‘she’ll be all right’. Joyce won’t be reconciled and goes to bed, leaving Marlene alone. She sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink. Angie comes in, calling for her mother. Marlene says, ‘No, she’s gone to bed. It’s Aunty Marlene.’ Angie speaks only one word, ‘Frightening’.
Note on characters
ISABELLA BIRD (1831–1904) lived in Edinburgh, travelled extensively between the ages of forty and seventy.
LADY NIJO (b. 1258) Japanese, was an Emperor’s courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan.
DULL GRET is the subject of the Brueghel painting, Dulle Griet, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils.
POPE JOAN, disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854–856.
PATIENT GRISELDA is the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in ‘The Clerk’s Tale’ of The Canterbury Tales.

Note on layout
A speech usually follows the one immediately before it BUT:

1: when one character starts speaking before the other has finished, the point of interruption is marked /.

  e.g. Isabella  This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.
   Nijo  In fact he was the ex-Emperor.

2: a character sometimes continues speaking right through another’s speech:

  e.g. Isabella  When I was forty I thought my life was over. / Oh I was pitiful. I was
   Nijo  I didn’t say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.
   Isabella  sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles . . . etc.

3: sometimes a speech follows on from a speech earlier than the one immediately before it, and continuity is marked*.

  e.g. Griselda  I’d seen him riding by, we all had. And he’d seen me in the fields with the sheep*.
   Isabella  I would have been well suited to minding sheep.
   Nijo  And Mr Nugent riding by.
   Isabella  Of course not, Nijo, I mean a healthy life in the open air.
   Joan  *He just rode up while you were minding the sheep and asked you to marry him?

where ‘in the fields with the sheep’ is the cue to both ‘I would have been’ and ‘He just rode up’.
Top Girls was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 28 August 1982 with the following cast:

Marlene regained
Isabella Bird
Joyce
Mrs Kidd
Lady Nijo
Win
Dull Gret
Angie
Pope Joan
Louise
Patient Griselda
Nell
Jeanine
Waitress
Kit
Shona

Directed by Max Stafford Clark
Designed by Peter Hartwell

This production transferred to Joe Papp’s Public Theatre, New York, later the same year, and returned to the Royal Court early in 1983.

ACT ONE Restaurant. Saturday night.
ACT TWO
Scene One: Joyce’s back yard. Sunday afternoon.
ACT THREE Joyce’s kitchen. Sunday evening, a year earlier.
I originally wrote the play with this three-act structure – the dinner party, Angie goes to London, and a year earlier. For the first production at the Royal Court Theatre in 1982, it was decided that there should only be one interval and that the parts of Nell and Jeanine should be doubled, so the play was divided in the middle of Act II and one of the interviews was moved out of the main office scene. In earlier editions, I left the option of performing it as two or three acts, but left the interview scene in its new place. Since then, I have found I prefer the original simple structure, which has been used in several recent productions, and this is the way I would like the play to be performed in future. There is no need for two full-scale intervals, where the audience leave the theatre, if that is inconvenient – there can be a short break after Act I and a main interval after Act II, when we have had Saturday, Sunday and Monday and come to the chronological end of the play, before going back a year.

Caryl Churchill, May 2012
Act One

Restaurant. Table set for dinner with white tablecloth. Six places. Marlene and Waitress.

Marlene Excellent, yes, table for six. One of them’s going to be late but we won’t wait. I’d like a bottle of Frascati straight away if you’ve got one really cold.

The Waitress goes.

Isabella Bird arrives.

Here we are. Isabella.

Isabella Congratulations, my dear.

Marlene Well, it’s a step. It makes for a party. I haven’t time for a holiday. I’d like to go somewhere exotic like you but I can’t get away. I don’t know how you could bear to leave Hawaii. / I’d like to lie in the sun forever, except of course I

Isabella I did think of settling.

Marlene can’t bear sitting still.

Isabella I sent for my sister Hennie to come and join me. I said, Hennie we’ll live here forever and help the natives. You can buy two sirloins of beef for what a pound of chops costs in Edinburgh. And Hennie wrote back, the dear, that yes, she would come to Hawaii if I wished, but I said she had far better stay where she was. Hennie was suited to life in Tobermory.

Marlene Poor Hennie.

Isabella Do you have a sister?

Marlene Yes in fact.

Isabella Hennie was happy. She was good. I did miss its face, my own pet. But I couldn’t stay in Scotland. I loathed the constant murk.

Marlene Ah! Nijo!
TOP GIRLS

She sees Lady Nijo arrive.

The Waitress enters with wine.

Nijo  Marlene!

Marlene  I think a drink while we wait for the others. I think a drink anyway. What a week.

The Waitress pours wine.

Nijo  It was always the men who used to get so drunk. I’d be one of the maidens, passing the sake.

Isabella  I’ve had sake. Small hot drink. Quite fortifying after a day in the wet.

Nijo  One night my father proposed three rounds of three cups, which was normal, and then the Emperor should have said three rounds of three cups, but he said three rounds of nine cups, so you can imagine. Then the Emperor passed his sake cup to my father and said, ‘Let the wild goose come to me this spring.’

Marlene  Let the what?

Nijo  It’s a literary allusion to a tenth-century epic, / His Majesty was very cultured.

Isabella  This is the Emperor of Japan? / I once met the Emperor of Morocco.

Nijo  In fact he was the ex-Emperor.

Marlene  But he wasn’t old? / Did you, Isabella?

Nijo  Twenty-nine.

Isabella  Oh it’s a long story.

Marlene  Twenty-nine’s an excellent age.

Nijo  Well I was only fourteen and I knew he meant something but I didn’t know what. He sent me an eight-layered gown and I sent it back. So when the time came I did nothing but cry. My thin gowns were badly ripped. But even
that morning when he left – he’d a green robe with a scarlet lining and

Marlene Are you saying he raped you?

Nijo very heavily embroidered trousers, I already felt different about him. It made me uneasy. No, of course not, Marlene, I belonged to him, it was what I was brought up for from a baby. I soon found I was sad if he stayed away. It was depressing day after day not knowing when he would come. I never enjoyed taking other women to him.

Isabella I certainly never saw my father drunk. He was a clergyman. / And I didn’t get married till I was fifty.

The Waitress brings menus.

Nijo Oh, my father was a very religious man. Just before he died he said to me, ‘Serve His Majesty, be respectful, if you lose his favour enter holy orders.’

Marlene But he meant stay in a convent, not go wandering round the country.

Nijo Priests were often vagrants, so why not a nun? You think I shouldn’t? / I still did what my father wanted.

Marlene No no, I think you should. / I think it was wonderful.

Dull Gret arrives.

Isabella I tried to do what my father wanted.

Marlene Gret, good. Nijo. Gret. / I know Griselda’s going to be late, but should we wait for Joan? / Let’s get you a drink.

Isabella Hello Gret! (Continues to Nijo.) I tried to be a clergyman’s daughter. Needlework, music, charitable schemes. I had a tumour removed from my spine and spent a great deal of time on the sofa. I studied the metaphysical poets and hymnology. / I thought I enjoyed intellectual pursuits.
Nijo  Ah, you like poetry. I come of a line of eight generations of poets. Father had a poem / in the anthology.

Isabella  My father taught me Latin although I was a girl. / But

Marlene  They didn’t have Latin at my school.

Isabella  really I was more suited to manual work. Cooking, washing, mending, riding horses. / Better than reading books,

Nijo  Oh but I’m sure you’re very clever.

Isabella  eh Gret? A rough life in the open air.

Nijo  I can’t say I enjoyed my rough life. What I enjoyed most was being the Emperor’s favourite / and wearing thin silk.

Isabella  Did you have any horses, Gret?

Gret  Pig.

Pope Joan arrives.

Marlene  Oh Joan, thank God, we can order. Do you know everyone? We were just talking about learning Latin and being clever girls. Joan was by way of an infant prodigy. Of course you were. What excited you when you were ten?

Joan  Because angels are without matter they are not individuals. Every angel is a species.

Marlene  There you are.

They laugh. They look at menus.

Isabella  Yes, I forgot all my Latin. But my father was the mainspring of my life and when he died I was so grieved. I’ll have the chicken, please, / and the soup.

Nijo  Of course you were grieved. My father was saying his prayers and he dozed off in the sun. So I touched his knee to rouse him. ‘I wonder what will happen,’ he said, and then he was dead before he finished the sentence. / If he’d died saying

Marlene  What a shock.
Nijo  his prayers he would have gone straight to heaven. / Waldorf salad.

Joan  Death is the return of all creatures to God.

Nijo  I shouldn’t have woken him.

Joan  Damnation only means ignorance of the truth. I was always attracted by the teachings of John the Scot, though he was inclined to confuse / God and the world.

Isabella  Grief always overwhelmed me at the time.

Marlene  What I fancy is a rare steak. Gret?

Isabella  I am of course a member of the / Church of England.*

Gret  Potatoes.

Marlene  *I haven’t been to church for years. / I like Christmas carols.

Isabella  Good works matter more than church attendance.

Marlene  Make that two steaks and a lot of potatoes. Rare. But I don’t do good works either.

Joan  Canelloni, please, / and a salad.

Isabella  Well, I tried, but oh dear. Hennie did good works.

Nijo  The first half of my life was all sin and the second / all repentance.*

Marlene  Oh what about starters?

Gret  Soup.

Joan  *And which did you like best?

Marlene  Were your travels just a penance? Avocado vinaigrette. Didn’t you / enjoy yourself?

Joan  Nothing to start with for me, thank you.

Nijo  Yes, but I was very unhappy. / It hurt to remember
TOP GIRLS

Marlene  And the wine list.
Nijo   the past. I think that was repentance.
Marlene  Well I wonder.
Nijo   I might have just been homesick.
Marlene  Or angry.
Nijo   Not angry, no, / why angry?
Gret   Can we have some more bread?
Marlene  Don’t you get angry? I get angry.
Nijo   But what about?
Marlene  Yes let’s have two more Frascati. And some more bread, please.

*The Waitress exits.*

Isabella  I tried to understand Buddhism when I was in Japan but all this birth and death succeeding each other through eternities just filled me with the most profound melancholy. I do like something more active.

Nijo   You couldn’t say I was inactive. I walked every day for twenty years.
Isabella  I don’t mean walking. / I mean in the head.
Nijo   I vowed to copy five Mahayana sutras. / Do you know how
Marlene  I don’t think religious beliefs are something we have in common. Activity yes.
Nijo   long they are? My head was active. / My head ached.
Joan   It’s no good being active in heresy.
Isabella  What heresy? She’s calling the Church of England / a heresy.
Joan   There are some very attractive / heresies.
Marlene  Well I’m not a Christian. / And I’m not a Buddhist.
Isabella  You have heard of it?
Marlene  We don’t all have to believe the same.
Isabella  I knew coming to dinner with a pope we should keep off religion.
Joan  I always enjoy a theological argument. But I won’t try to convert you, I’m not a missionary. Anyway I’m a heresy myself.
Isabella  There are some barbaric practices in the east.
Nijo  Barbaric?
Isabella  Among the lower classes.
Nijo  I wouldn’t know.
Isabella  Well theology always made my head ache.
Marlene  Oh good, some food.
Waitress *is bringing the first course.*
Nijo  How else could I have left the court if I wasn’t a nun? When Father died I had only His Majesty. So when I fell out of favour I had nothing. Religion is a kind of nothing / and I dedicated what was left of me to nothing.
Isabella  That’s what I mean about Buddhism. It doesn’t brace.
Marlene  Come on, Nijo, have some wine.
Nijo  Haven’t you ever felt like that? Nothing will ever happen again. I am dead already. You’ve all felt / like that.
Isabella  You thought your life was over but it wasn’t.
Joan  You wish it was over.
Gret  Sad.
Marlene  Yes, when I first came to London I sometimes... and when I got back from America I did. But only for a few hours. Not twenty years.

Isabella  When I was forty I thought my life was over. / Oh I

Nijio  I didn’t say I felt it for twenty years. Not every minute.

Isabella  was pitiful. I was sent on a cruise for my health and I felt even worse. Pains in my bones, pins and needles in my hands, swelling behind the ears, and – oh, stupidity. I shook all over, indefinable terror. And Australia seemed to me a hideous country, the acacias stank like drains. / I had a

Nijio  You were homesick.

Isabella  photograph for Hennie but I told her I wouldn’t send it, my hair had fallen out and my clothes were crooked, I looked completely insane and suicidal.

Nijio  So did I, exactly, dressed as a nun. I was wearing walking shoes for the first time.

Isabella  I longed to go home, / but home to what? Houses

Nijio  I longed to go back ten years.

Isabella  are so perfectly dismal.

Marlene  I thought travelling cheered you both up.

Isabella  Oh it did / of course. It was on the trip from

Nijio  I’m not a cheerful person, Marlene. I just laugh a lot.

Isabella  Australia to the Sandwich Isles, I fell in love with the sea. There were rats in the cabin and ants in the food but suddenly it was like a new world. I woke up every morning happy, knowing there would be nothing to annoy me. No nervousness. No dressing.

Nijio  Don’t you like getting dressed? I adored my clothes. / When I was chosen to give sake to His Majesty’s brother,

Marlene  You had prettier colours than Isabella.
Nijo the Emperor Kameyana, on his formal visit, I wore raw silk pleated trousers and a seven-layered gown in shades of red, and two outer garments, / yellow lined with green and a light

Marlene Yes, all that silk must have been very . . .

_The Waitress starts to clear the first course._

Joan I dressed as a boy when I left home.*

Nijo green jacket. Lady Betto had a five-layered gown in shades of green and purple.

Isabella *You dressed as a boy?

Marlene Of course, / for safety.

Joan It was easy, I was only twelve. Also women weren’t / allowed in the library. We wanted to study in Athens.

Marlene You ran away alone?

Joan No, not alone, I went with my friend. / He was sixteen

Nijo Ah, an elopement.

Joan but I thought I knew more science than he did and almost as much philosophy.

Isabella Well I always travelled as a lady and I repudiated strongly any suggestion in the press that I was other than feminine.

Marlene I don’t wear trousers in the office. / I could but I don’t.

Isabella There was no great danger to a woman of my age and appearance.

Marlene And you got away with it, Joan?

Joan I did then.

_The Waitress starts to bring the main course._

Marlene And nobody noticed anything?
TOP GIRLS

Joan They noticed I was a very clever boy. / And when I
Marlene I couldn’t have kept pretending for so long.

Joan shared a bed with my friend, that was ordinary – two
poor students in a lodging house. I think I forgot I was
pretending.

Isabella Rocky Mountain Jim, Mr Nugent, showed me no
disrespect. He found it interesting, I think, that I could make
scones and also lasso cattle. Indeed he declared his love for me,
which was most distressing.

Nijo What did he say? / We always sent poems first.

Marlene What did you say?

Isabella I urged him to give up whisky, / but he said it was
too late.

Marlene Oh Isabella.

Isabella He had lived alone in the mountains for many years.

Marlene But did you – ?

The Waitress goes.

Isabella Mr Nugent was a man that any woman might love
but none could marry. I came back to England.

Nijo Did you write him a poem when you left? / Snow on the

Marlene Did you never see him again?

Isabella No, never.

Nijo mountains. My sleeves are wet with tears. In England
no tears, no snow.

Isabella Well, I say never. One morning very early in
Switzerland, it was a year later, I had a vision of him as I last
saw him / in his trapper’s clothes with his hair round his face,

Nijo A ghost!

Isabella and that was the day, / I learnt later, he died with a
Nijo  Ah!

Isabella  bullet in his brain. / He just bowed to me and vanished.

Marlene  Oh Isabella.

Nijo  When your lover dies – One of my lovers died. / The priest Ariake.

Joan  My friend died. Have we all got dead lovers?

Marlene  Not me, sorry.

Nijo (to Isabella)  I wasn’t a nun, I was still at court, but he was a priest, and when he came to me he dedicated his whole life to hell. / He knew that when he died he would fall into one of the three lower realms. And he died, he did die.

Joan (to Marlene)  I’d quarrelled with him over the teachings of John the Scot, who held that our ignorance of God is the same as his ignorance of himself. He only knows what he creates because he creates everything he knows but he himself is above being – do you follow?

Marlene  No, but go on.

Nijo  I couldn’t bear to think / in what shape would he be reborn.*

Joan  St Augustine maintained that the Neo-Platonic Ideas are indivisible from God, but I agreed with John that the created

Isabella  *Buddhism is really most uncomfortable.

Joan  world is essences derived from Ideas which derived from God. As Denys the Areopagite said – the pseudo-Denys – first we give God a name, then deny it / then reconcile the

Nijo  In what shape would he return?

Joan  contradiction by looking beyond / those terms.

Marlene  Sorry, what? Denys said what?
Joan  Well we disagreed about it, we quarrelled. And next day he was ill, / I was so annoyed with him, all the time I was
Nijo  Misery in this life and worse in the next, all because of me.

Joan  nursing him I kept going over the arguments in my mind. Matter is not a means of knowing the essence. The source of the species is the Idea. But then I realised he’d never understand my arguments again, and that night he died. John the Scot held that the individual disintegrates / and there is no personal immortality.

Isabella  I wouldn’t have you think I was in love with Jim Nugent. It was yearning to save him that I felt.

Marlene (to Joan)  So what did you do?

Joan  First I decided to stay a man. I was used to it. And I wanted to devote my life to learning. Do you know why I went to Rome? Italian men didn’t have beards.

Isabella  The loves of my life were Hennie, my own pet, and my dear husband the doctor, who nursed Hennie in her last illness. I knew it would be terrible when Hennie died but I didn’t know how terrible. I felt half of myself had gone. How could I go on my travels without that sweet soul waiting at home for my letters? It was Doctor Bishop’s devotion to her in her last illness that made me decide to marry him. He and Hennie had the same sweet character. I had not.

Nijo  I thought His Majesty had a sweet character because when he found out about Ariake he was so kind. But really it was because he no longer cared for me. One night he even sent me out to a man who had been pursuing me. / He lay awake on the other side of the screens and listened.

Isabella  I did wish marriage had seemed more of a step. I tried very hard to cope with the ordinary drudgery of life. I was ill again with carbuncles on the spine and nervous prostration. I ordered a tricycle, that was my idea of adventure then. And John himself fell ill, with erysipelas and anaemia. I
began to love him with my whole heart but it was too late. He was a skeleton with transparent white hands. I wheeled him on various seafronts in a bathchair. And he faded and left me. There was nothing in my life. The doctors said I had gout / and my heart was much affected.

Nijo There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor’s favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. / But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

Joan There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth. I taught at the Greek School in Rome, which St Augustine had made famous. I was poor, I worked hard. I spoke apparently brilliantly, I was still very young, I was a stranger; suddenly I was quite famous, I was everyone’s favourite. Huge crowds came to hear me. The day after they made me cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. / But then I got up

Marlene Yes, success is very . . .

Joan determined to go on. I was seized again / with a desperate longing for the absolute.

Isabella Yes, yes, to go on. I sat in Tobermory among Hennie’s flowers and sewed a complete outfit in Jaeger flannel. / I was fifty-six years old.

Nijo Out of favour but I didn’t die. I left on foot, nobody saw me go. For the next twenty years I walked through Japan.

Gret Walking is good.

The Waitress enters.

Joan Pope Leo died and I was chosen. All right then. I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything.

Isabella I determined to leave my grief behind and set off for Tibet.
Marlene  Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think, Griselda isn’t even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.

Isabella  To yourself surely, / we’re here to celebrate your success.

Nijo  Yes, Marlene.

Joan  Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?

Marlene  Well it’s not Pope but it is managing director.*

Joan  And you find work for people.

Marlene  Yes, an employment agency.

Nijo  *Over all the women you work with. And the men.

Isabella  And very well deserved too. I’m sure it’s just the beginning of something extraordinary.

Marlene  Well it’s worth a party.

Isabella  To Marlene.*

Marlene  And all of us.

Joan  *Marlene.

Nijo  Marlene.

Gret  Marlene.

Marlene  We’ve all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements.

They laugh and drink a toast.

Isabella  Such adventures. We were crossing a mountain pass at seven thousand feet, the cook was all to pieces, the muleteers suffered fever and snow blindness. But even though my spine was agony I managed very well.

Marlene  Wonderful.
Nijo  Once I was ill for four months lying alone at an inn. Nobody to offer a horse to Buddha. I had to live for myself, and I did live.

Isabella  Of course you did. It was far worse returning to Tobermory. I always felt dull when I was stationary. / That’s why I could never stay anywhere.

Nijo  Yes, that’s it exactly. New sights. The shrine by the beach, the moon shining on the sea. The goddess had vowed to save all living things. / She would even save the fishes. I was full of hope.

Joan  I had thought the Pope would know everything. I thought God would speak to me directly. But of course he knew I was a woman.

Marlene  But nobody else even suspected?

_The Waitress brings more wine._

Joan  In the end I did take a lover again.*

Isabella  In the Vatican?

Gret  *Keep you warm.

Nijo  *Ah, lover.

Marlene  *Good for you.

Joan  He was one of my chamberlains. There are such a lot of servants when you’re a Pope. The food’s very good. And I realised I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope says, that’s true.

Nijo  What was he like, the chamberlain?*

Gret  Big cock.

Isabella  Oh Gret.

Marlene  *Did he fancy you when he thought you were a fella?

Nijo  What was he like?
Joan  He could keep a secret.

Marlene  So you did know everything.

Joan  Yes, I enjoyed being Pope. I consecrated bishops and let people kiss my feet. I received the King of England when he came to submit to the church. Unfortunately there were earthquakes, and some village reported it had rained blood, and in France there was a plague of giant grasshoppers, but I don’t think that can have been my fault, do you?*

*Laughter.

The grasshoppers fell on the English Channel and were washed up on shore and their bodies rotted and poisoned the air and everyone in those parts died.

*Laughter.

Isabella  *Such superstition! I was nearly murdered in China by a howling mob. They thought the barbarians ate babies and put them under railway sleepers to make the tracks steady, and ground up their eyes to make the lenses of cameras. / So

Marlene  And you had a camera!

Isabella  they were shouting, ’child-eater, child-eater’. Some people tried to sell girl babies to Europeans for cameras or stew!

*Laughter.

Marlene  So apart from the grasshoppers it was a great success.

Joan  Yes, if it hadn’t been for the baby I expect I’d have lived to an old age like Theodora of Alexandria, who lived as a monk. She was accused by a girl / who fell in love with her of being the father of her child and –

Nijo  But tell us what happened to your baby. I had some babies.

Marlene  Didn’t you think of getting rid of it?
Joan  Wouldn’t that be a worse sin than having it? / But a Pope with a child was about as bad as possible.

Marlene  I don’t know, you’re the Pope.

Joan  But I wouldn’t have known how to get rid of it.

Marlene  Other Popes had children, surely.

Joan  They didn’t give birth to them.

Nijo  Well you were a woman.

Joan  Exactly and I shouldn’t have been a woman. Women, children and lunatics can’t be Pope.

Marlene  So the only thing to do / was to get rid of it somehow.

Nijo  You had to have it adopted secretly.

Joan  But I didn’t know what was happening. I thought I was getting fatter, but then I was eating more and sitting about, the life of a Pope is quite luxurious. I don’t think I’d spoken to a woman since I was twelve. The chamberlain was the one who realised.

Marlene  And by then it was too late.

Joan  Oh I didn’t want to pay attention. It was easier to do nothing.

Nijo  But you had to plan for having it. You had to say you were ill and go away.

Joan  That’s what I should have done I suppose.

Marlene  Did you want them to find out?

Nijo  I too was often in embarrassing situations, there’s no need for a scandal. My first child was His Majesty’s, which unfortunately died, but my second was Akebono’s. I was seventeen. He was in love with me when I was thirteen, he was very upset when I had to go to the Emperor, it was very romantic, a lot of poems. Now His Majesty hadn’t been near
me for two months so he thought I was four months pregnant when I was really six, so when I reached the ninth month / I

Joan  I never knew what month it was.

Nijo  announced I was seriously ill, and Akebono announced he had gone on a religious retreat. He held me round the waist and lifted me up as the baby was born. He cut the cord with a short sword, wrapped the baby in white and took it away. It was only a girl but I was sorry to lose it. Then I told the Emperor that the baby had miscarried because of my illness, and there you are. The danger was past.

Joan  But Nijo, I wasn’t used to having a woman’s body.

Isabella  So what happened?

Joan  I didn’t know of course that it was near the time. It was Rogation Day, there was always a procession. I was on the horse dressed in my robes and a cross was carried in front of me, and all the cardinals were following, and all the clergy of Rome, and a huge crowd of people. / We set off from

Marlene  Total Pope.

Joan  St Peter’s to go to St John’s. I had felt a slight pain earlier, I thought it was something I’d eaten, and then it came back, and came back more often. I thought when this is over I’ll go to bed. There were still long gaps when I felt perfectly all right and I didn’t want to attract attention to myself and spoil the ceremony. Then I suddenly realised what it must be. I had to last out till I could get home and hide. Then something changed, my breath started to catch, I couldn’t plan things properly any more. We were in a little street that goes between St Clement’s and the Colosseum, and I just had to get off the horse and sit down for a minute. Great waves of pressure were going through my body, I heard sounds like a cow lowing, they came out of my mouth. Far away I heard people screaming, ‘The Pope is ill, the Pope is dying.’ And the baby just slid out onto the road.*
Marlene  The cardinals / won’t have known where to put themselves.

Nijo  Oh dear, Joan, what a thing to do! In the street!

Isabella  *How embarrassing.

Gret  In a field, yah.

*They are laughing.*

Joan  One of the cardinals said, ‘The Antichrist!’ and fell over in a faint.

*They all laugh.*

Marlene  So what did they do? They weren’t best pleased.

Joan  They took me by the feet and dragged me out of town and stoned me to death.

*They stop laughing.*

Marlene  Joan, how horrible.

Joan  I don’t really remember.

Nijo  And the child died too?

Joan  Oh yes, I think so, yes.

Pause.

*The Waitress enters to clear the plates. They start talking quietly.*

Isabella (to Joan)  I never had any children. I was very fond of horses.

Nijo (to Marlene)  I saw my daughter once. She was three years old. She wore a plum-red / small-sleeved gown.

Akebono’s

Isabella  Birdie was my favourite. A little Indian bay mare I rode in the Rocky Mountains.
Nijo wife had taken the child because her own died. Everyone thought I was just a visitor. She was being brought up carefully so she could be sent to the palace like I was.

Isabella Legs of iron and always cheerful, and such a pretty face. If a stranger led her she reared up like a bronco.

Nijo I never saw my third child after he was born, the son of Ariake the priest. Ariake held him on his lap the day he was born and talked to him as if he could understand, and cried. My fourth child was Ariake's too. Ariake died before he was born. I didn't want to see anyone, I stayed alone in the hills. It was a boy again, my third son. But oddly enough I felt nothing for him.

Marlene How many children did you have, Gret?

Gret Ten.

Isabella Whenever I came back to England I felt I had so much to atone for. Hennie and John were so good. I did no good in my life. I spent years in self-gratification. So I hurled myself into committees, I nursed the people of Tobermory in the epidemic of influenza, I lectured the Young Women's Christian Association on Thrift. I talked and talked explaining how the East was corrupt and vicious. My travels must do good to someone beside myself. I wore myself out with good causes.

Marlene Oh God, why are we all so miserable?

Joan The procession never went down that street again.

Marlene They rerouted it specially?

Joan Yes they had to go all round to avoid it. And they introduced a pierced chair.

Marlene A pierced chair?

Joan Yes, a chair made out of solid marble with a hole in the seat / and it was in the Chapel of the Saviour, and after he was

Marlene You're not serious.
Joan    elected the Pope had to sit in it.
Marlene   And someone looked up his skirts? Not really?
Isabella   What an extraordinary thing.
Joan    Two of the clergy / made sure he was a man.
Nijo    On their hands and knees!
Marlene   A pierced chair!
Gret     Balls!

Griselda arrives unnoticed.

Nijo    Why couldn’t he just pull up his robe?
Joan    He had to sit there and look dignified.
Marlene   You could have made all your chamberlains sit in it.*

Gret     Big one, small one.
Nijo    Very useful chair at court.
Isabella *Or the laird of Tobermory in his kilt.

They are quite drunk. They get the giggles.

Marlene notices Griselda.

Marlene  Griselda! / There you are. Do you want to eat?
Griselda  I’m sorry I’m so late. No, no, don’t bother.
Marlene  Of course it’s no bother. / Have you eaten?
Griselda  No really, I’m not hungry.
Marlene    Well have some pudding.
Griselda  I never eat pudding.
Marlene  Griselda, I hope you’re not anorexic. We’re having pudding, I am, and getting nice and fat.
Griselda  Oh if everyone is. I don’t mind.
Marlene  Now who do you know? This is Joan who was Pope in the ninth century, and Isabella Bird, the Victorian traveller, and Lady Nijo from Japan, Emperor’s concubine and Buddhist nun, thirteenth century, nearer your own time, and Gret who was painted by Brueghel. Griselda’s in Boccaccio and Petrarch and Chaucer because of her extraordinary marriage. I’d like profiteroles because they’re disgusting.

Joan  Zabaglione, please.

Isabella  Apple pie / and cream.

Nijo  What’s this?

Marlene  Zabaglione, it’s Italian, it’s what Joan’s having, / it’s delicious.

Nijo  A Roman Catholic / dessert? Yes please.

Marlene  Gret?

Gret  Cake.

Griselda  Just cheese and biscuits, thank you.

Marlene  Yes, Griselda’s life is like a fairy-story, except it starts with marrying the prince.

Griselda  He’s only a marquis, Marlene.

Marlene  Well everyone for miles around is his liege and he’s absolute lord of life and death and you were the poor but beautiful peasant girl and he whisked you off. / Near enough a prince.

Nijo  How old were you?

Griselda  Fifteen.

Nijo  I was brought up in court circles and it was still a shock. Had you ever seen him before?

Griselda  I’d seen him riding by, we all had. And he’d seen me in the fields with the sheep.*

Isabella  I would have been well suited to minding sheep.
Nijo    And Mr Nugent riding by.

Isabella  Of course not, Nijo, I mean a healthy life in the open air.

Joan    *He just rode up while you were minding the sheep and asked you to marry him?

Griselda  No, no, it was on the wedding day. I was waiting outside the door to see the procession. Everyone wanted him to get married so there’d be an heir to look after us when he died, / and at last he announced a day for the wedding but

Marlene  I don’t think Walter wanted to get married. It is Walter? Yes.

Griselda  nobody knew who the bride was, we thought it must be a foreign princess, we were longing to see her. Then the carriage stopped outside our cottage and we couldn’t see the bride anywhere. And he came and spoke to my father.

Nijo    And your father told you to serve the Prince.

Griselda  My father could hardly speak. The Marquis said it wasn’t an order, I could say no, but if I said yes I must always obey him in everything.

Marlene  That’s when you should have suspected.

Griselda  But of course a wife must obey her husband. / And of course I must obey the Marquis.*

Isabella  I swore to obey dear John, of course, but it didn’t seem to arise. Naturally I wouldn’t have wanted to go abroad while I was married.

Marlene  *Then why bother to mention it at all? He’d got a thing about it, that’s why.

Griselda  I’d rather obey the Marquis than a boy from the village.

Marlene  Yes, that’s a point.

Joan    I never obeyed anyone. They all obeyed me.
TOP GIRLS

Nijo  And what did you wear? He didn’t make you get married in your own clothes? That would be perverse. *

Marlene  Oh, you wait.

Griselda  *He had ladies with him who undressed me and they had a white silk dress and jewels for my hair.

Marlene  And at first he seemed perfectly normal?

Griselda  Marlene, you’re always so critical of him. Of course he was normal, he was very kind.

Marlene  But Griselda, come on, he took your baby.

Griselda  Walter found it hard to believe I loved him. He couldn’t believe I would always obey him. He had to prove it.

Marlene  I don’t think Walter likes women.

Griselda  I’m sure he loved me, Marlene, all the time.

Marlene  He just had a funny way of showing it.

Griselda  It was hard for him too.

Joan  How do you mean he took away your baby?

Nijo  Was it a boy?

Griselda  No, the first one was a girl.

Nijo  Even so it’s hard when they take it away. Did you see it at all?

Griselda  Oh yes, she was six weeks old.

Nijo  Much better to do it straight away.

Isabella  But why did your husband take the child?

Griselda  He said all the people hated me because I was just one of them. And now I had a child they were restless. So he had to get rid of the child to keep them quiet. But he said he wouldn’t snatch her, I had to agree and obey and give her up. So when I was feeding her a man came in and took her away. I
thought he was going to kill her even before he was out of the room.

Marlene  But you let him take her? You didn’t struggle?

Griselda  I asked him to give her back so I could kiss her. And I asked him to bury her where no animals could dig her up. / It

Isabella  Oh my dear.

Griselda  was Walter’s child to do what he liked with.*

Marlene  Walter was bonkers.

Gret  Bastard.

Isabella  *But surely, murder.

Griselda  I had promised.

Marlene  I can’t stand this. I’m going for a pee.

Marlene goes out.

*The Waitress brings dessert.*

Nijo  No, I understand. Of course you had to, he was your life. And were you in favour after that?

Griselda  Oh yes, we were very happy together. We never spoke about what had happened.

Isabella  I can see you were doing what you thought was your duty. But didn’t it make you ill?

Griselda  No, I was very well, thank you.

Nijo  And you had another child?

Griselda  Not for four years, but then I did, yes, a boy.

Nijo  Ah a boy. / So it all ended happily.

Griselda  Yes he was pleased. I kept my son till he was two years old. A peasant’s grandson. It made the people angry. Walter explained.
Isabella  But surely he wouldn’t kill his children / just because –

Griselda  Oh it wasn’t true. Walter would never give in to the people. He wanted to see if I loved him enough.

Joan    He killed his children / to see if you loved him enough?

Nijo     Was it easier the second time or harder?

Griselda  It was always easy because I always knew I would do what he said.

Pause. They start to eat.

Isabella  I hope you didn’t have any more children.

Griselda  Oh no, no more. It was twelve years till he tested me again.

Isabella  So whatever did he do this time? / My poor John, I never loved him enough, and he would never have dreamt . . .

Griselda  He sent me away. He said the people wanted him to marry someone else who’d give him an heir and he’d got special permission from the Pope. So I said I’d go home to my father. I came with nothing / so I went with nothing. I

Nijo     Better to leave if your master doesn’t want you.

Griselda  took off my clothes. He let me keep a slip so he wouldn’t be shamed. And I walked home barefoot. My father came out in tears. Everyone was crying except me.

Nijo     At least your father wasn’t dead. / I had nobody.

Isabella  Well it can be a relief to come home. I loved to see Hennie’s sweet face again.

Griselda  Oh yes, I was perfectly content. And quite soon he sent for me again.

Joan     I don’t think I would have gone.

Griselda  But he told me to come. I had to obey him. He wanted me to help prepare his wedding. He was getting
married to a young girl from France / and nobody except me
knew how to arrange things the way he liked them.

Nijo  It’s always hard taking him another woman.

Marlene comes back.

Joan  I didn’t live a woman’s life. I don’t understand it.

Griselda  The girl was sixteen and far more beautiful than
me. I could see why he loved her. / She had her younger
brother with her as a page.

The Waitress enters.

Marlene  Oh God, I can’t bear it. I want some coffee. Six

Griselda  They all went in to the feast I’d prepared. And he
stayed behind, and put his arms round me and kissed me. / I
felt half asleep with the shock.

Nijo  Oh, like a dream.

Marlene  And he said, ‘This is your daughter and your son.’

Griselda  Yes.

Joan  What?

Nijo  Oh. Oh I see. You got them back.

Isabella  I did think it was remarkably barbaric to kill them
but you learn not to say anything. / So he had them brought up
secretly I suppose.

Marlene  Walter’s a monster. Weren’t you angry? What did
you do?

Griselda  Well I fainted. Then I cried and kissed the children. /
Everyone was making a fuss of me.

Nijo  But did you feel anything for them?

Griselda  What?

Nijo  Did you feel anything for the children?
28 TOP GIRLS

Griselda  Of course, I loved them.
Joan    So you forgave him and lived with him?
Griselda  He suffered so much all those years.
Isabella  Hennie had the same sweet nature.
Nijo     So they dressed you again?
Griselda  Cloth of gold.
Joan     I can’t forgive anything.
Marlene  You really are exceptional, Griselda.
Nijo     Nobody gave me back my children.
Nijo  cries. The Waitress brings brandies.

Isabella  I can never be like Hennie. I was always so busy in England, a kind of business I detested. The very presence of people exhausted my emotional reserves. I could not be like Hennie however I tried. I tried and was as ill as could be. The doctor suggested a steel net to support my head, the weight of my own head was too much for my diseased spine. / It is dangerous to put oneself in depressing circumstances. Why should I do it?

Joan    Don’t cry.
Nijo     My father and the Emperor both died in the autumn. So much pain.
Joan    Yes, but don’t cry.
Nijo     They wouldn’t let me into the palace when he was dying. I hid in the room with his coffin, then I couldn’t find where I’d left my shoes, I ran after the funeral procession in bare feet, I couldn’t keep up. When I got there it was over, a few wisps of smoke in the sky, that’s all that was left of him. What I want to know is, if I’d still been at court, would I have been allowed to wear full mourning?
Marlene  I’m sure you would.
Nijo   Why do you say that? You don’t know anything about it. Would I have been allowed to wear full mourning?

Isabella  How can people live in this dim pale island and wear our hideous clothes? I cannot and will not live the life of a lady.

Nijo   I’ll tell you something that made me angry. I was eighteen, at the Full Moon Ceremony. They make a special rice gruel and stir it with their sticks, and then they beat their women across the loins so they’ll have sons and not daughters. So the Emperor beat us all / very hard as usual – that’s not it,

Marlene  What a sod.

Nijo   Marlene, that’s normal, what made us angry, he told his attendants they could beat us too. Well they had a wonderful time. / So Lady Genki and I made a plan, and the ladies all hid

_The Waitress has entered with coffees._

Marlene  I’d like another brandy please. Better make it six.

Nijo   in his rooms, and Lady Mashimizu stood guard with a stick at the door, and when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again. Afterwards there was a terrible fuss. The nobles were horrified. ‘We wouldn’t even dream of stepping on your Majesty’s shadow.’ And I had hit him with a stick. Yes, I hit him with a stick.

Joan   Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
   e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
   non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
   sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.
Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
   per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.
Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tener
   edita doctrina sapientum templae serena, /
   despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
   errare atquc viam palantis quaeore vitae,
Griselda  I do think – I do wonder – it would have been nicer if Walter hadn’t had to.
Isabella  Why should I? Why should I?
Marlene  Of course not.
Nijo    I hit him with a stick.
Joan certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,  
         noctes atque dies niti praestante labore  
         ad summas emergere opes retumque potiri.  
         O miseris / hominum mentis, I pectora caeca!*  
Isabella  Oh miseras!
Nijo    *Pectora caeca.
Joan qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periclis  
         degitur hoc aevi quodcumquest! / nonne videre  
         nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui  
         corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur.
Joan subsides.
Gret    We come into hell through a big mouth. Hell’s black and red. / It’s like the village where I come from. There’s a river and
Marlene (to Joan)  Shut up, pet.
Isabella  Listen, she’s been to hell.
Gret    a bridge and houses. There’s places on fire like when the soldiers come. There’s a big devil sat on a roof with a big hole in his arse and he’s scooping stuff out of it with a big ladle and it’s falling down on us, and it’s money, so a lot of the women stop and get some. But most of us is fighting the devils. There’s lots of little devils, our size, and we get them down all right and give them a beating. There’s lots of funny creatures round your feet, you don’t like to look, like rats and lizards, and nasty things, a bum with a face, and fish with legs, and faces on things that don’t have faces on. But they don’t hurt, you just keep going. Well we’d had worse, you see, we’d had the
Spanish. We’d all had family killed. My big son die on a wheel. Birds eat him. My baby, a soldier run her through with a sword. I’d had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, we’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.’ And they all come out just as they was / from baking or washing in their

Nijo  All the ladies come.

Gret  aprons, and we push down the street and the ground opens up and we go through a big mouth into a street just like ours but in hell. I’ve got a sword in my hand from somewhere and I fill a basket with gold cups they drink out of down there. You just keep running on and fighting / you didn’t stop for nothing. Oh we give them devils such a beating.

Nijo  Take that, take that.

Joan  Something something something mortisque timores tum vacuum pectus – damn.

Quod si ridicula –

something something on and on and on and something splendorem pupureai.

Isabella  I thought I would have a last jaunt up the west river in China. Why not? But the doctors were so very grave. I just went to Morocco. The sea was so wild I had to be landed by ship’s crane in a coal bucket. / My horse was a terror to me a

Gret  Coal bucket, good.

Joan  nos in luce timemus
    something
terrorem.

Isabella  powerful black charger.

Nijo  is laughing and crying.

Joan  gets up and is sick in a corner.
Marlene is drinking Isabella's brandy.

So off I went to visit the Berber sheikhs in full blue trousers and great brass spurs. I was the only European woman ever to have seen the Emperor of Morocco. I was seventy years old. What lengths to go to for a last chance of joy. I knew my return of vigour was only temporary, but how marvellous while it lasted.
Act Two

Scene One

Joyce's back yard. The house with back door is upstage. Downstage a shelter made of junk, made by children. Two girls, Angie and Kit, are in it, squashed together. Angie is sixteen, Kit is twelve. They cannot be seen from the house. Joyce calls from the house.

Joyce  Angie. Angie are you out there?

Silence. They keep still and wait. When nothing else happens they relax.

Angie  Wish she was dead.

Kit  Wanna watch The Exterminator?

Angie  You're sitting on my leg.

Kit  There's nothing on telly. We can have an ice cream. Angie?

Angie  Shall I tell you something?

Kit  Do you wanna watch The Exterminator?

Angie  It's X, innit.

Kit  I can get into Xs.

Angie  Shall I tell you something?

Kit  We'll go to something else. We'll go to Ipswich. What's on the Odeon?

Angie  She won't let me, will she?

Kit  Don't tell her.

Angie  I've no money.

Kit  I'll pay.
Angie She'll moan though, won’t she?

Kit I’ll ask her for you if you like.

Angie I’ve no money, I don’t want you to pay.

Kit I’ll ask her.

Angie She don’t like you.

Kit I still got three pounds birthday money. Did she say she don’t like me? I’ll go by myself then.

Angie Your mum don’t let you. I got to take you.

Kit She won’t know.

Angie You’d be scared who’d sit next to you.

Kit No I wouldn’t.

She does like me anyway.

Tell me then.

Angie Tell you what?

Kit It’s you she doesn’t like.

Angie Well I don’t like her so tough shit.


Silence. Nothing happens.

Angie Last night when I was in bed. I been thinking yesterday could I make things move. You know, make things move by thinking about them without touching them. Last night I was in bed and suddenly a picture fell down off the wall.

Kit What picture?

Angie My gran, that picture. Not the poster. The photograph in the frame.

Kit Had you done something to make it fall down?
Angie  I must have done.
Kit   But were you thinking about it?
Angie Not about it, but about something.
Kit   I don’t think that’s very good.
Angie You know the kitten?
Kit   Which one?
Angie There only is one. The dead one.
Kit   What about it?
Angie I heard it last night.
Kit   Where?
Angie Out here. In the dark. What if I left you here in the dark all night?
Kit   You couldn’t. I’d go home.
Angie You couldn’t.
Kit   I’d go home.
Angie No you couldn’t, not if I said.
Kit   I could.
Angie Then you wouldn’t see anything. You’d just be ignorant.
Kit   I can see in the daytime.
Angie No you can’t. You can’t hear it in the daytime.
Kit   I don’t want to hear it.
Angie You’re scared that’s all.
Kit   I’m not scared of anything.
Angie You’re scared of blood.
Kit  It’s not the same kitten anyway. You just heard an old cat, / you just heard some old cat.

Angie  You don’t know what I heard. Or what I saw. You don’t know nothing because you’re a baby.

Kit  You’re sitting on me.

Angie  Mind my hair / you silly cunt.

Kit  Stupid fucking cow, I hate you.

Angie  I don’t care if you do.

Kit  You’re horrible.

Angie  I’m going to kill my mother and you’re going to watch.

Kit  I’m not playing.

Angie  You’re scared of blood.

Kit puts her hand under her dress, brings it out with blood on her finger.

Kit  There, see, I got my own blood, so.

Angie takes Kit’s hand and licks her finger.

Angie  Now I’m a cannibal. I might turn into a vampire now.

Kit  That picture wasn’t nailed up right.

Angie  You’ll have to do that when I get mine.

Kit  I don’t have to.

Angie  You’re scared.

Kit  I’ll do it, I might do it. I don’t have to just because you say. I’ll be sick on you.

Angie  I don’t care if you are sick on me, I don’t mind sick. I don’t mind blood. If I don’t get away from here I’m going to die.

Kit  I’m going home.
**Angie** You can’t go through the house. She’ll see you.

**Kit** I won’t tell her.

**Angie** Oh great, fine.

**Kit** I’ll say I was by myself. I’ll tell her you’re at my house and I’m going there to get you.

**Angie** She knows I’m here, stupid.

**Kit** Then why can’t I go through the house?

**Angie** Because I said not.

**Kit** My mum don’t like you anyway.

**Angie** I don’t want her to like me. She’s a slag.

**Kit** She is not.

**Angie** She does it with everyone.

**Kit** She does not.

**Angie** You don’t even know what it is.

**Kit** Yes I do.

**Angie** Tell me then.

**Kit** We get it all at school, cleverclogs. It’s on television. You haven’t done it.

**Angie** How do you know?

**Kit** Because I know you haven’t.

**Angie** You know wrong then because I have.

**Kit** Who with?

**Angie** I’m not telling you / who with.

**Kit** You haven’t anyway.

**Angie** How do you know?

**Kit** Who with?
Angie I’m not telling you.

Kit You said you told me everything.

Angie I was lying wasn’t I?

Kit Who with? You can’t tell me who with because / you never –

Angie Sh.

Joyce has come out of the house. She stops halfway across the yard and listens. They listen.

Joyce You there Angie? Kit? You there Kitty? Want a cup of tea? I’ve got some chocolate biscuits. Come on now I’ll put the kettle on. Want a choccy biccy, Angie?

*They all listen and wait.*

Fucking rotten little cunt. You can stay there and die. I’ll lock the back door.

*They all wait.*

Joyce goes back to the house.

Angie and Kit sit in silence for a while.

Kit When there’s a war, where’s the safest place?

Angie Nowhere.

Kit New Zealand is, my mum said. Your skin’s burned right off. Shall we go to New Zealand?

Angie I’m not staying here.

Kit Shall we go to New Zealand?

Angie You’re not old enough.

Kit You’re not old enough.

Angie I’m old enough to get married.

Kit You don’t want to get married.
Angie  No but I’m old enough.

Kit  I’d find out where they were going to drop it and stand right in the place.

Angie  You couldn’t find out.

Kit  Better than walking round with your skin dragging on the ground. Eugh. / Would you like walking round with your skin dragging on the ground?

Angie  You couldn’t find out, stupid, it’s a secret.

Kit  Where are you going?

Angie  I’m not telling you.

Kit  Why?

Angie  It’s a secret.

Kit  But you tell me all your secrets.

Angie  Not the true secrets.

Kit  Yes you do.

Angie  No I don’t.

Kit  I want to go somewhere away from the war.

Angie  Just forget the war.

Kit  I can’t.

Angie  You have to. It’s so boring.

Kit  I’ll remember it at night.

Angie  I’m going to do something else anyway.


Angie  It’s a true secret.

Kit  It can’t be worse than the kitten. And killing your mother. And the war.

Angie  Well I’m not telling you so you can die for all I care.
Kit My mother says there’s something wrong with you playing with someone my age. She says why haven’t you got friends your own age. People your own age know there’s something funny about you. She says you’re a bad influence. She says she’s going to speak to your mother.

Angie twists Kit’s arm till she cries out.

Angie Say you’re a liar.

Kit She said it not me.

Angie Say you eat shit.

Kit You can’t make me.

Angie let’s go.

Angie I don’t care anyway. I’m leaving.

Kit Go on then.

Angie You’ll all wake up one morning and find I’ve gone.

Kit Good.

Angie I’m not telling you when.

Kit Go on then.

Angie I’m sorry I hurt you.

Kit I’m tired.

Angie Do you like me?

Kit I don’t know.

Angie You do like me.

Kit I’m going home.

Kit gets up.

Angie No you’re not.

Kit I’m tired.

Angie She’ll see you.
Kit  She’ll give me a chocolate biscuit.

Angie  Kitty.

Kit  Tell me where you’re going.

Angie  Sit down.

Kit  *sits in the hut again.*

Kit  Go on then.

Angie  Swear?

Kit  Swear.

Angie  I’m going to London. To see my aunt.

Kit  And what?

Angie  That’s it.

Kit  I see my aunt all the time.

Angie  I don’t see my aunt.

Kit  What’s so special?

Angie  It is special. She’s special.

Kit  Why?

Angie  She is.

Kit  Why?

Angie  She is.

Kit  Why?

Angie  My mother hates her.

Kit  Why?

Angie  Because she does.

Kit  Perhaps she’s not very nice.

Angie  She is nice.
Kit    How do you know?
Angie  Because I know her.
Kit    You said you never see her.
Angie  I saw her last year. You saw her.
Kit    Did I?
Angie  Never mind.
Kit    I remember her. That aunt. What’s so special?
Angie  She gets people jobs.
Kit    What’s so special?
Angie  I think I’m my aunt’s child. I think my mother’s really my aunt.
Kit    Why?
Angie  Because she goes to America, now shut up.
Kit    I’ve been to London.
Angie  Now give us a cuddle and shut up because I’m sick.
Kit    You’re sitting on my arm.
Silence.
Joyce  comes out and comes up to them quietly.
Joyce  Come on.
Kit    Oh hello.
Joyce  Time you went home.
Kit    We want to go to the Odeon.
Joyce  What time?
Kit    Don’t know.
Joyce  What’s on?
Kit    Don’t know.
Joyce  Don’t know much do you?
Kit    That all right then?
Joyce  Angie’s got to clean her room first.
Angie  No I don’t.
Joyce  Yes you do, it’s a pigsty.
Angie  Well I’m not.
Joyce  Then you’re not going. I don’t care.
Angie  Well I am going.
Joyce  You’ve no money, have you?
Angie  Kit’s paying anyway.
Joyce  No she’s not.
Kit    I’ll help you with your room.
Joyce  That’s nice.
Angie  No you won’t. You wait here.
Kit    Hurry then.
Angie  I’m not hurrying. You just wait.

Angie goes into the house. Silence.

Joyce  I don’t know.

Silence.

How’s school then?
Kit    All right.

Joyce  What are you now? Third year?
Kit    Second year.

Joyce  Your mum says you’re good at English.

Silence.
Maybe Angie should’ve stayed on.

Kit She didn’t like it.

Joyce I didn’t like it. And look at me. If your face fits at school it’s going to fit other places too. It wouldn’t make no difference to Angie. She’s not going to get a job when jobs are hard to get. I’d be sorry for anyone in charge of her. She’d better get married. I don’t know who’d have her, mind. She’s one of those girls might never leave home. What do you want to be when you grow up, Kit?

Kit Physicist.

Joyce What?

Kit Nuclear physicist.

Joyce Whatever for?

Kit I could, I’m clever.

Joyce I know you’re clever, pet.

Silence.

I’ll make a cup of tea.

Silence.

Looks like it’s going to rain.

Silence.

Don’t you have friends your own age?

Kit Yes.

Joyce Well then.

Kit I’m old for my age.

Joyce And Angie’s simple is she? She’s not simple.

Kit I love Angie.

Joyce She’s clever in her own way.
Kit   You can’t stop me.

Joyce  I don’t want to.

Kit    You can’t, so.

Joyce  Don’t be cheeky, Kitty. She’s always kind to little children.

Kit     She’s coming so you better leave me alone.

Angie comes out. She has changed into an old best dress, slightly small for her.

Joyce  What you put that on for? Have you done your room? You can’t clean your room in that.

Angie  I looked in the cupboard and it was there.

Joyce  Of course it was there, it’s meant to be there. Is that why it was a surprise, finding something in the right place? I should think she’s surprised, wouldn’t you Kit, to find something in her room in the right place.

Angie  I decided to wear it.

Joyce  Not today, why? To clean your room? You’re not going to the pictures till you’ve done your room. You can put your dress on after if you like.

Angie picks up a brick.

Have you done your room? You’re not getting out of it, you know.

Kit     Angie, let’s go.

Joyce  She’s not going till she’s done her room.

Kit     It’s starting to rain.

Joyce  Come on, come on then. Hurry and do your room, Angie, and then you can go to the cinema with Kit. Oh it’s wet, come on. We’ll look up the time in the paper. Does your mother know, Kit, it’s going to be a late night for you, isn’t it? Hurry up, Angie. You’ll spoil your dress. You make me sick.
Joyce and Kit run in.

Angie stays where she is. Sound of rain.

Kit comes out of the house and shouts.

Kit Angie. Angie, come on, you’ll get wet.

Kit comes back to Angie.

Angie I put on this dress to kill my mother.

Kit I suppose you thought you’d do it with a brick.

Angie You can kill people with a brick.

Kit Well you didn’t, so.

Scene Two


Nell Coffee coffee coffee coffee / coffee.

Win The roses were smashing. / Mermaid.

Nell Ohhh.

Win Iceberg. He taught me all their names.

Nell has some coffee now.

Nell Ah. Now then.

Win He has one of the finest rose gardens in West Sussex. He exhibits.

Nell He what?

Win His wife was visiting her mother. It was like living together.

Nell Crafty, you never said.

Win He rang on Saturday morning.
Nell  Lucky you were free.
Win   That’s what I told him.
Nell  Did you hell.
Win   Have you ever seen a really beautiful rose garden?
Nell  I don’t like flowers. / I like swimming pools.
Win   Marilyn. Esther’s Baby. They’re all called after birds.
Nell  Our friend’s late. Celebrating all weekend I bet you.
Win   I’d call a rose Elvis. Or John Conteh.
Nell  Is Howard in yet?
Win   If he is he’ll be bleeping us with a problem.
Nell  Howard can just hang on to himself.
Win   Howard’s really cut up.
Nell  Howard thinks because he’s a fella the job was his as of right. Our Marlene’s got far more balls than Howard and that’s that.
Win   Poor little bugger.
Nell  He’ll live.
Win   He’ll move on.
Nell  I wouldn’t mind a change of air myself.
Win   Serious?
Nell  I’ve never been a staying put lady. Pastures new.
Win   So who’s the pirate?
Nell  There’s nothing definite.
Win   Inquiries?
Nell  There’s always inquiries. I’d think I’d got bad breath if there stopped being inquiries. Most of them can’t afford me. Or you.
Win  I’m all right for the time being. Unless I go to Australia.
Nell  There’s not a lot of room upward.
Win  Marlene’s filled it up.
Nell  Good luck to her. Unless there’s some prospects moneywise.
Win  You can but ask.
Nell  Can always but ask.
Win  So what have we got? I’ve got a Mr Holden I saw last week.
Nell  Any use?
Win  Pushy. Bit of a cowboy.
Nell  Good-looker?
Win  Good dresser.
Nell  High flyer?
Win  That’s his general idea certainly but I’m not sure he’s got it up there.
Nell  Prestel wants six high flyers and I’ve only seen two and a half.
Win  He’s making a bomb on the road but he thinks it’s time for an office. I sent him to IBM but he didn’t get it.
Nell  Prestel’s on the road.
Win  He’s not overbright.
Nell  Can he handle an office?
Win  Provided his secretary can punctuate he should go far.
Nell  Bear Prestel in mind then, I might put my head round the door. I’ve got that poor little nerd I should never have said I could help. Tender heart me.
Win  Tender like old boots. How old?
Nell  Yes well forty-five.

Win  Say no more.

Nell  He knows his place, he’s not after calling himself a manager, he’s just a poor little bod wants a better commission and a bit of sunshine.

Win  Don’t we all.

Nell  He’s just got to relocate. He’s got a bungalow in Dymchurch.

Win  And his wife says.

Nell  The lady wife wouldn’t care to relocate. She’s going through the change.

Win  It’s his funeral, don’t waste your time.

Nell  I don’t waste a lot.

Win  Good weekend you?

Nell  You could say.

Win  Which one?

Nell  One Friday, one Saturday.

Win  Aye aye.

Nell  Sunday night I watched telly.

Win  Which of them do you like best really?

Nell  Sunday was best, I liked the Ovaltine.


Nell  I’ve a lady here thinks she can sell.

Win  Taking her on?

Nell  She’s had some jobs.

Win  Services?

Nell  No, quite heavy stuff, electric.
TOP GIRLS

Win  Tough bird like us.
Nell  We could do with a few more here.
Win  There’s nothing going here.
Nell  No but I always want the tough ones when I see them. Hang on to them.
Win  I think we’re plenty.
Nell  Derek asked me to marry him again.
Win  He doesn’t know when he’s beaten.
Nell  I told him I’m not going to play house, not even in Ascot.
Win  Mind you, you could play house.
Nell  If I chose to play house I would play house ace.
Win  You could marry him and go on working.
Nell  I could go on working and not marry him.
Marlene arrives.
Marlene  Morning ladies.
Win and Nell cheer and whistle.
Mind my head.
Nell  Coffee coffee coffee.
Win  We’re tactfully not mentioning you’re late.
Marlene  Fucking tube.
Win  We’ve heard that one.
Nell  We’ve used that one.
Win  It’s the top executive doesn’t come in as early as the poor working girl.
Marlene  Pass the sugar and shut your face, pet.
Win  Well I’m delighted.
Nell  Howard’s looking sick.
Win  Howard is sick. He’s got ulcers and heart. He told me.
Nell  He’ll have to stop then won’t he?
Win  Stop what?
Nell  Smoking, drinking, shouting. Working.
Win  Well, working.
Nell  We’re just looking through the day.
Marlene  I’m doing some of Pam’s ladies. They’ve been piling up while she’s away.
Nell  Half a dozen little girls and an arts graduate who can’t type.
Win  I spent the whole weekend at his place in Sussex.
Nell  She fancies his rose garden.
Win  I had to lie down in the back of the car so the neighbours wouldn’t see me go in.
Nell  You’re kidding.
Win  It was funny.
Nell  Fuck that for a joke.
Win  It was funny.
Marlene  Anyway they’d see you in the garden.
Win  The garden has extremely high walls.
Nell  I think I’ll tell the wife.
Win  Like hell.
Nell  She might leave him and you could have the rose garden.
Win  The minute it’s not a secret I’m out on my ear.
Nell  Don’t know why you bother.
Win   Bit of fun.
Nell  I think it’s time you went to Australia.
Win   I think it’s pushy Mr Holden time.
Nell  If you’ve any really pretty bastards, Marlene, I want some for Prestel.

Marlene I might have one this afternoon. This morning it’s all Pam’s secretarial.
Nell  Not long now and you’ll be upstairs watching over us all.
Marlene Do you feel bad about it?
Nell  I don’t like coming second.
Marlene Who does?
Win   We’d rather it was you than Howard. We’re glad for you, aren’t we Nell.
Nell  Oh yes. Aces.

Interview

Marlene and Jeanine.

Marlene Right Jeanine, you are Jeanine aren’t you? Let’s have a look. Os and As / No As, all those Os you probably
Jeanine Six Os.

Marlene could have got an A. / Speeds, not brilliant, not too bad.
Jeanine I wanted to go to work.

Marlene Well, Jeanine, what’s your present job like?
Jeanine I’m a secretary.
Marlene  Secretary or typist?
Jeanine  I did start as a typist but the last six months I’ve been a secretary.
Marlene  To?
Jeanine  To three of them, really, they share me. There’s Mr Ashford, he’s the office manager, and Mr Philby / is sales, and –
Marlene  Quite a small place?
Jeanine  A bit small.
Marlene  Friendly?
Jeanine  Oh it’s friendly enough.
Marlene  Prospects?
Jeanine  I don’t think so, that’s the trouble. Miss Lewis is secretary to the managing director and she’s been there forever, and Mrs Bradford / is –
Marlene  So you want a job with better prospects?
Jeanine  I want a change.
Marlene  So you’ll take anything comparable?
Jeanine  No, I do want prospects. I want more money.
Marlene  You’re getting –?
Jeanine  Hundred.
Marlene  It’s not bad you know. You’re what? Twenty?
Jeanine  I’m saving to get married.
Marlene  Does that mean you don’t want a long-term job, Jeanine?
Jeanine  I might do.
Marlene  Because where do the prospects come in? No kids for a bit?
Jeanine  Oh no, not kids, not yet.
Marlene  So you won’t tell them you’re getting married?
Jeanine  Had I better not?
Marlene  It would probably help.
Jeanine  I’m not wearing a ring. We thought we wouldn’t spend on a ring.
Marlene  Saves taking it off.
Jeanine  I wouldn’t take it off.
Marlene  There’s no need to mention it when you go for an interview. / Now Jeanine do you have a feel for any particular
Jeanine  But what if they ask?
Marlene  kind of company?
Jeanine  I thought advertising.
Marlene  People often do think advertising. I have got a few vacancies but I think they’re looking for something glossier.
Jeanine  You mean how I dress? / I can dress different. I
Marlene  I mean experience.
Jeanine  dress like this on purpose for where I am now.
Marlene  I have a marketing department here of a knitwear manufacturer. / Marketing is near enough advertising.
Secretary
Jeanine  Knitwear?
Marlene  to the marketing manager, he’s thirty-five, married,
I’ve sent him a girl before and she was happy, left to have a baby, you won’t want to mention marriage there. He’s very fair
I think, good at his job, you won’t have to nurse him along.
Hundred and ten, so that’s better than you’re doing now.
Jeanine  I don’t know.
Marlene  I’ve a fairly small concern here, father and two sons, you’d have more say potentially, secretarial and reception duties, only a hundred but the job’s going to grow with the concern and then you’ll be in at the top with new girls coming in underneath you.

Jeanine  What is it they do?

Marlene  Lampshades. / This would be my first choice for you.

Jeanine  Just lampshades?

Marlene  There’s plenty of different kinds of lampshade. So we’ll send you there, shall we, and the knitwear second choice. Are you free to go for an interview any day they call you?

Jeanine  I’d like to travel.

Marlene  We don’t have any foreign clients. You’d have to go elsewhere.

Jeanine  Yes I know. I don’t really . . . I just mean . . .

Marlene  Does your fiancé want to travel?

Jeanine  I’d like a job where I was here in London and with him and everything but now and then – I expect it’s silly. Are there jobs like that?

Marlene  There’s personal assistant to a top executive in a multinational. If that’s the idea you need to be planning ahead. Is that where you want to be in ten years?

Jeanine  I might not be alive in ten years.

Marlene  Yes but you will be. You’ll have children.

Jeanine  I can’t think about ten years.

Marlene  You haven’t got the speeds anyway. So I’ll send you to these two shall I? You haven’t been to any other agency? Just so we don’t get crossed wires. Now Jeanine I want you to get one of these jobs, all right? If I send you that means I’m putting myself on the line for you. Your presentation’s OK, you look fine, just be confident and go in there convinced that
this is the best job for you and you’re the best person for the job. If you don’t believe it they won’t believe it.

Jeanine  Do you believe it?
Marlene  I think you could make me believe it if you put your mind to it.
Jeanine  Yes, all right.

**Interview**

**Win and Louise.**

Win  Now Louise, hello, I have your details here. You’ve been very loyal to the one job I see.
Louise  Yes I have.
Win  Twenty-one years is a long time in one place.
Louise  I feel it is. I feel it’s time to move on.
Win  And you are what age now?
Louise  I’m in my early forties.
Win  Exactly?
Louise  Forty-six.
Win  It’s not necessarily a handicap, well it is of course we have to face that, but it’s not necessarily a disabling handicap, experience does count for something.
Louise  I hope so.
Win  Now between ourselves is there any trouble, any reason why you’re leaving that wouldn’t appear on the form?
Louise  Nothing like that.
Win  Like what?
Louise  Nothing at all.
Win  No long-term understandings come to a sudden end, making for an insupportable atmosphere?
Louise  I’ve always completely avoided anything like that at all.

Win  No personality clashes with your immediate superiors or inferiors?

Louise  I’ve always taken care to get on very well with everyone.

Win  I only ask because it can affect the reference and it also affects your motivation, I want to be quite clear why you’re moving on. So I take it the job itself no longer satisfies you. Is it the money?

Louise  It’s partly the money. It’s not so much the money.

Win  Nine thousand is very respectable. Have you dependants?

Louise  No, no dependants. My mother died.

Win  So why are you making a change?

Louise  Other people make changes.

Win  But why are you, now, after spending most of your life in the one place?

Louise  There you are, I’ve lived for that company, I’ve given my life really you could say because I haven’t had a great deal of social life, I’ve worked in the evenings. I haven’t had office entanglements for the very reason you just mentioned and if you are committed to your work you don’t move in many other circles. I had management status from the age of twenty-seven and you’ll appreciate what that means. I’ve built up a department. And there it is, it works extremely well, and I feel I’m stuck there. I’ve spent twenty years in middle management. I’ve seen young men who I trained go on, in my own company or elsewhere, to higher things. Nobody notices me, I don’t expect it, I don’t attract attention by making mistakes, everybody takes it for granted that my work is perfect. They will notice me when I go, they will be sorry I think to lose me, they will offer me more money of course, I will refuse. They will see when I’ve gone what I was doing for them.
Win  If they offer you more money you won’t stay?
Louise  No I won’t.
Win  Are you the only woman?
Louise  Apart from the girls of course, yes. There was one, she was my assistant, it was the only time I took on a young woman assistant, I always had my doubts. I don’t care greatly for working with women, I think I pass as a man at work. But I did take on this young woman, her qualifications were excellent, and she did well, she got a department of her own, and left the company for a competitor where she’s now on the board and good luck to her. She has a different style, she’s a new kind of attractive well-dressed – I don’t mean I don’t dress properly. But there is a kind of woman who is thirty now who grew up in a different climate. They are not so careful. They take themselves for granted. I have had to justify my existence every minute, and I have done so, I have proved – well.

Win  Let’s face it, vacancies are going to be ones where you’ll be in competition with younger men. And there are companies that will value your experience enough you’ll be in with a chance. There are also fields that are easier for a woman, there is a cosmetic company here where your experience might be relevant. It’s eight and a half, I don’t know if that appeals.

Louise  I’ve proved I can earn money. It’s more important to get away. I feel it’s now or never. I sometimes / think –

Win  You shouldn’t talk too much at an interview.

Louise  I don’t. I don’t normally talk about myself. I know very well how to handle myself in an office situation. I only talk to you because it seems to me this is different, it’s your job to understand me, surely. You asked the questions.

Win  I think I understand you sufficiently.

Louise  Well good, that’s good.

Win  Do you drink?
Louise  Certainly not. I’m not a teetotaller, I think that’s very suspect, it’s seen as being an alcoholic if you’re teetotal. What do you mean? I don’t drink. Why?

Win  I drink.

Louise  I don’t.

Win  Good for you.

Main office

Marlene and Angie.

Angie arrives.

Angie  Hello.

Marlene  Have you an appointment?

Angie  It’s me. I’ve come.

Marlene  What? It’s not Angie?

Angie  It was hard to find this place. I got lost.

Marlene  How did you get past the receptionist? The girl on the desk, didn’t she try to stop you?

Angie  What desk?

Marlene  Never mind.

Angie  I just walked in. I was looking for you.

Marlene  Well you found me.

Angie  Yes.

Marlene  So where’s your mum? Are you up in town for the day?

Angie  Not really.

Marlene  Sit down. Do you feel all right?

Angie  Yes thank you.
Marlene  So where’s Joyce?
Angie   She’s at home.
Marlene  Did you come up on a school trip then?
Angie   I’ve left school.
Marlene  Did you come up with a friend?
Angie   No. There’s just me.
Marlene  You came up by yourself, that’s fun. What have you been doing? Shopping? Tower of London?
Angie   No, I just come here. I come to you.
Marlene  That’s very nice of you to think of paying your aunty a visit. There’s not many nieces make that the first port of call. Would you like a cup of coffee?
Angie   No thank you.
Marlene  Tea, orange?
Angie   No thank you.
Marlene  Do you feel all right?
Angie   Yes thank you.
Marlene  Are you tired from the journey?
Angie   Yes, I’m tired from the journey.
Marlene  You sit there for a bit then. How’s Joyce?
Angie   She’s all right.
Marlene  Same as ever.
Angie   Oh yes.
Marlene  Unfortunately you’ve picked a day when I’m rather busy, if there’s ever a day when I’m not, or I’d take you out to lunch and we’d go to Madame Tussaud’s. We could go shopping. What time do you have to be back? Have you got a day return?
Angie  No.

Marlene  So what train are you going back on?

Angie  I came on the bus.

Marlene  So what bus are you going back on? Are you staying the night?

Angie  Yes.

Marlene  Who are you staying with? Do you want me to put you up for the night, is that it?

Angie  Yes please.

Marlene  I haven’t got a spare bed.

Angie  I can sleep on the floor.

Marlene  You can sleep on the sofa.

Angie  Yes please.

Marlene  I do think Joyce might have phoned me. It’s like her.

Angie  This is where you work is it?

Marlene  It’s where I have been working the last two years but I’m going to move into another office.

Angie  It’s lovely.

Marlene  My new office is nicer than this. There’s just the one big desk in it for me.

Angie  Can I see it?

Marlene  Not now, no, there’s someone else in it now. But he’s leaving at the end of next week and I’m going to do his job.

Angie  Is that good?

Marlene  Yes, it’s very good.

Angie  Are you going to be in charge?
Marlene Yes I am.
Angie I knew you would be.
Marlene How did you know?
Angie I knew you’d be in charge of everything.
Marlene Not quite everything.
Angie You will be.
Marlene Well we’ll see.
Angie Can I see it next week then?
Marlene Will you still be here next week?
Angie Yes.
Marlene Don’t you have to go home?
Angie No.
Marlene Why not?
Angie It’s all right.
Marlene Is it all right?
Angie Yes, don’t worry about it.
Marlene Does Joyce know where you are?
Angie Yes of course she does.
Marlene Well does she?
Angie Don’t worry about it.
Marlene How long are you planning to stay with me then?
Angie You know when you came to see us last year?
Marlene Yes, that was nice wasn’t it?
Angie That was the best day of my whole life.
Marlene So how long are you planning to stay?
Angie  Don’t you want me?
Marlene  Yes yes, I just wondered.
Angie  I won’t stay if you don’t want me.
Marlene  No, of course you can stay.
Angie  I’ll sleep on the floor. I won’t be any bother.
Marlene  Don’t get upset.
Angie  I’m not, I’m not. Don’t worry about it.
Mrs Kidd comes in.
Mrs Kidd  Excuse me.
Marlene  Yes.
Mrs Kidd  Excuse me.
Marlene  Can I help you?
Mrs Kidd  Excuse me bursting in on you like this but I have
to talk to you.
Marlene  I am engaged at the moment. / If you could go to
reception –
Mrs Kidd  I’m Rosemary Kidd, Howard’s wife, you don’t
recognise me but we did meet, I remember you of course / but
you wouldn’t –
Marlene  Yes of course, Mrs Kidd, I’m sorry, we did meet.
Howard’s about somewhere I expect, have you looked in his
office?
Mrs Kidd  Howard’s not about, no. I’m afraid it’s you I’ve
come to see if I could have a minute or two.
Marlene  I do have an appointment in five minutes.
Mrs Kidd  This won’t take five minutes. I’m very sorry. It is a
matter of some urgency.
Marlene  Well of course. What can I do for you?
Mrs Kidd  I just wanted a chat, an informal chat. It’s not something I can simply – I’m sorry if I’m interrupting your work. I know office work isn’t like housework / which is all interruptions.

Marlene  No no, this is my niece, Angie. Mrs Kidd.

Mrs Kidd  Very pleased to meet you.

Angie  Very well thank you.

Mrs Kidd  Howard’s not in today.

Marlene  Isn’t he?

Mrs Kidd  He’s feeling poorly.

Marlene  I didn’t know. I’m sorry to hear that.

Mrs Kidd  The fact is he’s in a state of shock. About what’s happened.

Marlene  What has happened?

Mrs Kidd  You should know if anyone. I’m referring to you being appointed managing director instead of Howard. He hasn’t been at all well all weekend. He hasn’t slept for three nights. I haven’t slept.

Marlene  I’m sorry to hear that, Mrs Kidd. Has he thought of taking sleeping pills?

Mrs Kidd  It’s very hard when someone has worked all these years.

Marlene  Business life is full of little setbacks. I’m sure Howard knows that. He’ll bounce back in a day or two. We all bounce back.

Mrs Kidd  If you could see him you’d know what I’m talking about. What’s it going to do to him working for a woman? I think if it was a man he’d get over it as something normal.

Marlene  I think he’s going to have to get over it.
Mrs Kidd  It's me that bears the brunt. I'm not the one that's been promoted. I put him first every inch of the way. And now what do I get? You women this, you women that. It's not my fault. You're going to have to be very careful how you handle him. He's very hurt.

Marlene  Naturally I'll be tactful and pleasant to him, you don't start pushing someone round. I'll consult him over any decisions affecting his department. But that's no different, Mrs Kidd, from any of my other colleagues.

Mrs Kidd  I think it is different, because he's a man.

Marlene  I'm not quite sure why you came to see me.

Mrs Kidd  I had to do something.

Marlene  Well you've done it, you've seen me. I think that's probably all we've time for. I'm sorry he's been taking it out on you. He really is a shit, Howard.

Mrs Kidd  But he's got a family to support. He's got three children. It's only fair.

Marlene  Are you suggesting I give up the job to him then?

Mrs Kidd  It had crossed my mind if you were unavailable after all for some reason, he would be the natural second choice I think, don't you? I'm not asking.

Marlene  Good.

Mrs Kidd  You mustn't tell him I came. He's very proud.

Marlene  If he doesn't like what's happening here he can go and work somewhere else.

Mrs Kidd  Is that a threat?

Marlene  I'm sorry but I do have some work to do.

Mrs Kidd  It's not that easy, a man of Howard's age. You don't care. I thought he was going too far but he's right. You're one of these ballbreakers / that's what you are. You'll end up
Marlene I’m sorry but I do have some work to do.
Mrs Kidd miserable and lonely. You’re not natural.
Marlene Could you please piss off?
Mrs Kidd I thought if I saw you at least I’d be doing something.

Mrs Kidd goes.

Marlene I’ve got to go and do some work now. Will you come back later?
Angie I think you were wonderful.
Marlene I’ve got to go and do some work now.
Angie You told her to piss off.
Marlene Will you come back later?
Angie Can’t I stay here?
Marlene Don’t you want to go sightseeing?
Angie I’d rather stay here.
Marlene You can stay here I suppose, if it’s not boring.
Angie It’s where I most want to be in the world.
Marlene I’ll see you later then.
Marlene goes.

Angie sits at Win’s desk.

Interview

Nell and Shona.

Nell Is this right? You are Shona?
Shona Yeh.

Nell It says here you’re twenty-nine.
Shona  Yeh.

Nell  Too many late nights, me. So you’ve been where you are for four years, Shona, you’re earning six basic and three commission. So what’s the problem?

Shona  No problem.

Nell  Why do you want a change?

Shona  Just a change.

Nell  Change of product, change of area?

Shona  Both.

Nell  But you’re happy on the road?

Shona  I like driving.

Nell  You’re not after management status?

Shona  I would like management status.

Nell  You’d be interested in titular management status but not come off the road?

Shona  I want to be on the road, yeh.

Nell  So how many calls have you been making a day?

Shona  Six.

Nell  And what proportion of those are successful?

Shona  Six.

Nell  That’s hard to believe.

Shona  Four.

Nell  You find it easy to get the initial interest do you?

Shona  Oh yeh, I get plenty of initial interest.

Nell  And what about closing?

Shona  I close, don’t I?
Nell  Because that’s what an employer is going to have doubts about with a lady as I needn’t tell you, whether she’s got the guts to push through to a closing situation. They think we’re too nice. They think we listen to the buyer’s doubts. They think we consider his needs and his feelings.

Shona  I never consider people’s feelings.

Nell  I was selling for six years, I can sell anything, I’ve sold in three continents, and I’m jolly as they come but I’m not very nice.

Shona  I’m not very nice.

Nell  What sort of time do you have on the road with the other reps? Get on all right? Handle the chat?

Shona  I get on. Keep myself to myself.

Nell  Fairly much of a loner are you?

Shona  Sometimes.

Nell  So what field are you interested in?

Shona  Computers.

Nell  That’s a top field as you know and you’ll be up against some very slick fellas there, there’s some very pretty boys in computers, it’s an American-style field.

Shona  That’s why I want to do it.

Nell  Video systems appeal? That’s a high-flying situation.

Shona  Video systems appeal OK.

Nell  Because Prestel have half a dozen vacancies I’m looking to fill at the moment. We’re talking in the area of ten to fifteen thousand here and upwards.

Shona  Sounds OK.

Nell  I’ve half a mind to go for it myself. But it’s good money here if you’ve got the top clients. Could you fancy it do you think?
Shona  Work here?

Nell  I’m not in a position to offer, there’s nothing officially
going just now, but we’re always on the lookout. There’s not
that many of us. We could keep in touch.

Shona  I like driving.

Nell  So the Prestel appeals?

Shona  Yeh.

Nell  What about ties?

Shona  No ties.

Nell  So relocation wouldn’t be a problem.

Shona  No problem.

Nell  So just fill me in a bit more could you about what
you’ve been doing.

Shona  What I’ve been doing. It’s all down there.

Nell  The bare facts are down here but I’ve got to present you
to an employer.

Shona  I’m twenty-nine years old.

Nell  So it says here.

Shona  We look young. Younerness runs in the family in our
family.

Nell  So just describe your present job for me.

Shona  My present job at present. I have a car. I have a
Porsche. I go up the M1 a lot. Burn up the M1 a lot. Straight
up the M1 in the fast lane to where the clients are,
Staffordshire, Yorkshire, I do a lot in Yorkshire. I’m selling
electric things. Like dishwashers, washing machines, stainless
steel tubs are a feature and the reliability of the programme.
After sales service, we offer a very good after sales service,
spare parts, plenty of spare parts. And fridges, I sell a lot of
fridges specially in the summer. People want to buy fridges in
the summer because of the heat melting the butter and you get fed up standing the milk in a basin of cold water with a cloth over, stands to reason people don’t want to do that in this day and age. So I sell a lot of them. Big ones with big freezers. Big freezers. And I stay in hotels at night when I’m away from home. On my expense account. I stay in various hotels. They know me, the ones I go to. I check in, have a bath, have a shower. Then I go down to the bar, have a gin and tonic, have a chat. Then I go into the dining room and have dinner. I usually have fillet steak and mushrooms, I like mushrooms. I like smoked salmon very much. I like having a salad on the side. Green salad. I don’t like tomatoes.

Nell  Christ what a waste of time.
Shona  Beg your pardon?
Nell  Not a word of this is true is it?
Shona  How do you mean?
Nell  You just filled in the form with a pack of lies.
Shona  Not exactly.
Nell  How old are you?
Shona  Twenty-nine.
Nell  Nineteen?
Shona  Twenty-one.
Nell  And what jobs have you done? Have you done any?
Shona  I could though, I bet you.

Main office

Angie sitting as before.

Win comes in.

Win  Who’s sitting in my chair?
Angie  What? Sorry.
Win  Who’s been eating my porridge?

Angie  What?

Win  It’s all right, I saw Marlene. Angie isn’t it? I’m Win. And I’m not going out for lunch because I’m knackered. I’m going to set me down here and have a yoghurt. Do you like yoghurt?

Angie  No.

Win  That’s good because I’ve only got one. Are you hungry?

Angie  No.

Win  There’s a cafe on the corner.

Angie  No thank you. Do you work here?

Win  How did you guess?

Angie  Because you look as if you might work here and you’re sitting at the desk. Have you always worked here?

Win  No I was headhunted. That means I was working for another outfit like this and this lot came and offered me more money. I broke my contract, there was a hell of a stink. There’s not many top ladies about. Your aunty’s a smashing bird.

Angie  Yes I know.

Marlene  Fan are you? Fan of your aunty’s?

Angie  Do you think I could work here?

Win  Not at the moment.

Angie  How do I start?

Win  What can you do?

Angie  I don’t know. Nothing.

Win  Type?

Angie  Not very well. The letters jump up when I do capitals. I was going to do a CSE in commerce but I didn’t.

Win  What have you got?
Angie  What?
Win    CSEs, Os.
Angie  Nothing, none of that. Did you do all that?
Win    Oh yes, all that, and a science degree funnily enough. I started out doing medical research but there’s no money in it. I thought I’d go abroad. Did you know they sell Coca-Cola in Russia and Pepsi-cola in China? You don’t have to be qualified as much as you might think. Men are awful bullshitters, they like to make out jobs are harder than they are. Any job I ever did I started doing it better than the rest of the crowd and they didn’t like it. So I’d get unpopular and I’d have a drink to cheer myself up. I lived with a fella and supported him for four years, he couldn’t get work. After that I went to California. I like the sunshine. Americans know how to live. This country’s too slow. Then I went to Mexico, still in sales, but it’s no country for a single lady. I came home, went bonkers for a bit, thought I was five different people, got over that all right, the psychiatrist said I was perfectly sane and highly intelligent. Got married in a moment of weakness and he’s inside now, he’s been inside four years, and I’ve not been to see him too much this last year. I like this better than sales, I’m not really that aggressive. I started thinking sales was a good job if you want to meet people, but you’re meeting people that don’t want to meet you. It’s no good if you like being liked. Here your clients want to meet you because you’re the one doing them some good. They hope.

Angie *has fallen asleep*. Nell *comes in*.

Nell  You’re talking to yourself, sunshine.
Win    So what’s new?
Nell  Who is this?
Win    Marlene’s little niece.
Nell  What’s she got, brother, sister? She never talks about her family.
Win    I was telling her my life story.
Nell   Violins?
Win    No, success story.
Nell   You’ve heard Howard’s had a heart attack?
Win    No, when?
Nell   I heard just now. He hadn’t come in, he was at home, he’s gone to hospital. He’s not dead. His wife was here, she rushed off in a cab.
Win    Too much butter, too much smoke. We must send him some flowers.

Marlene comes in.
You’ve heard about Howard?
Marlene  Poor sod.
Nell    Lucky he didn’t get the job if that’s what his health’s like.

Marlene  Is she asleep?
Win     She wants to work here.
Marlene  Packer in Tesco more like.
Win     She’s a nice kid. Isn’t she?
Marlene  She’s a bit thick. She’s a bit funny.
Win     She thinks you’re wonderful.
Marlene  She’s not going to make it.
Act Three

A year earlier. Sunday evening. Joyce's kitchen. Joyce, Angie, Marlene. Marlene is taking presents out of a bright carrier bag. Angie has already opened a box of chocolates.

Marlene Just a few little things. I've no memory for

Joyce There's no need.

Marlene birthdays have I, and Christmas seems to slip by. So I think I owe Angie a few presents.

Joyce What do you say?

Angie Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Aunty Marlene.

She opens a present. It is the dress from Act One, new.

Angie Oh look, Mum, isn't it lovely?

Marlene I don't know if it's the right size. She's grown up since I saw her. I knew she was always tall for her age.

Angie Isn't it lovely?

Joyce She's a big lump.

Marlene Hold it up, Angie, let's see.

Angie I'll put it on, shall I?

Marlene Yes, try it on.

Joyce Go on to your room then, we don't want / a strip show thank you.

Angie Of course I'm going to my room, what do you think? Look Mum, here's something for you. Open it, go on. What is it? Can I open it for you?

Joyce Yes, you open it, pet.

Angie Don't you want to open it yourself? Go on.
Joyce  I don’t mind, you can do it.


Joyce  You’re too young.

Angie  I can play wearing it like dressing up.

Joyce  And you’re too old for that. Here, give it here, I’ll do it, you’ll tip the whole bottle over yourself / and we’ll have you smelling all summer.

Angie  Put it on you. Do I smell? Put it on Aunty too. Put it on Aunty too. Let’s all smell.

Marlene  I didn’t know what you’d like.

Joyce  There’s no danger I’d have it already, / that’s one thing.

Angie  Now we all smell the same.

Marlene  It’s a bit of nonsense.

Joyce  It’s very kind of you Marlene, you shouldn’t.

Angie  Now. I’ll put on the dress and then we’ll see.

Angie  goes.

Joyce  You’ve caught me on the hop with the place in a mess. / If you’d let me know you was coming I’d have got

Marlene  That doesn’t matter.

Joyce  something in to eat. We had our dinner dinnertime. We’re just going to have a cup of tea. You could have an egg.

Marlene  No, I’m not hungry. Tea’s fine.

Joyce  I don’t expect you take sugar.

Marlene  Why not?

Joyce  You take care of yourself.
Marlene  How do you mean you didn’t know I was coming?
Joyce  You could have written. I know we’re not on the
phone but we’re not completely in the dark ages, / we do have
a postman.
Marlene  But you asked me to come.
Joyce  How did I ask you to come?
Marlene  Angie said when she phoned up.
Joyce  Angie phoned up, did she?
Marlene  Was it just Angie’s idea?
Joyce  What did she say?
Marlene  She said you wanted me to come and see you. / It
was a couple of weeks ago. How was I to know that’s a
Joyce  Ha.
Marlene  ridiculous idea? My diary’s always full a couple of
weeks ahead so we fixed it for this weekend. I was meant to
get here earlier but I was held up. She gave me messages
from you.
Joyce  Didn’t you wonder why I didn’t phone you myself?
Marlene  She said you didn’t like using the phone. You’re shy
on the phone and can’t use it. I don’t know what you’re like,
do I.
Joyce  Are there people who can’t use the phone?
Marlene  I expect so.
Joyce  I haven’t met any.
Marlene  Why should I think she was lying?
Joyce  Because she’s like what she’s like.
Marlene  How do I know / what she’s like?
Joyce  It's not my fault you don't know what she's like. You never come and see her.

Marlene  Well I have now / and you don't seem over the moon. *

Joyce  Good.

*Well I'd have got a cake if she'd told me.

Pause.

Marlene  I did wonder why you wanted to see me.

Joyce  I didn't want to see you.

Marlene  Yes, I know. Shall I go?

Joyce  I don't mind seeing you.

Marlene  Great, I feel really welcome.

Joyce  You can come and see Angie any time you like, I'm not stopping you. / You know where we are. You're the

Marlene  Ta ever so.

Joyce  one went away, not me. I'm right here where I was.

And will be a few years yet I shouldn't wonder.

Marlene  All right. All right.

Joyce  gives Marlene a cup of tea.

Joyce  Tea.

Marlene  Sugar?

Joyce  passes Marlene the sugar.

It's very quiet down here.

Joyce  I expect you'd notice it.

Marlene  The air smells different too.

Joyce  That's the scent.
Marlene  No, I mean walking down the lane.
Joyce  What sort of air you get in London then?
Angie comes in, wearing the dress. It fits.
Marlene  Oh, very pretty. You do look pretty, Angie.
Joyce  That fits all right.
Marlene  Do you like the colour?
Angie  Beautiful. Beautiful.
Joyce  You better take it off, you’ll get it dirty.
Angie  I want to wear it. I want to wear it.
Marlene  It is for wearing after all. You can’t just hang it up and look at it.
Angie  I love it.
Joyce  Well if you must you must.
Angie  If someone asks me what’s my favourite colour I’ll tell them it’s this. Thank you very much, Aunty Marlene.
Marlene  You didn’t tell your mum you asked me down.
Angie  I wanted it to be a surprise.
Joyce  I’ll give you a surprise / one of these days.
Angie  I thought you’d like to see her. She hasn’t been here since I was nine. People do see their aunts.
Marlene  Is it that long? Doesn’t time fly?
Angie  I wanted to.
Joyce  I’m not cross.
Angie  Are you glad?
Joyce  I smell nicer anyhow, don’t I?
Kit comes in without saying anything, as if she lived there.
Marlene  I think it was a good idea, Angie, about time. We are sisters after all. It's a pity to let that go.

Joyce  This is Kitty, / who lives up the road. This is Angie’s Aunty Marlene.

Kit  What’s that?

Angie  It’s a present. Do you like it?

Kit  It’s all right. / Are you coming out?

Marlene  Hello, Kitty.

Angie  *No.

Kit  What’s that smell?

Angie  It’s a present.

Kit  It’s horrible. Come on.

Marlene  Have a chocolate.

Angie  *No, I’m busy.

Kit  Coming out later?

Angie  No.

Kit (to Marlene)  Hello.

Kit goes without a chocolate.

Joyce  She's a little girl Angie sometimes plays with because she's the only child lives really close. She's like a little sister to her really. Angie’s good with little children.

Marlene  Do you want to work with children, Angie? / Be a teacher or a nursery nurse?

Joyce  I don’t think she’s ever thought of it.

Marlene  What do you want to do?

Joyce  She hasn’t an idea in her head what she wants to do. / Lucky to get anything.
Marlene  Angie?
Joyce  She's not clever like you.
       *Pause.*
Marlene  I'm not clever, just pushy.
Joyce  True enough.
Marlene  *takes a bottle of whisky out of the bag.*
       I don't drink spirits.
Angie  You do at Christmas.
Joyce  It's not Christmas, is it?
Angie  It's better than Christmas.
Marlene  Glasses?
Joyce  Just a small one then.
Marlene  Do you want some, Angie?
Angie  I can't, can I?
Joyce  Taste it if you want. You won't like it.
Marlene  We got drunk together the night your grandfather
died.
Joyce  We did not get drunk.
Marlene  I got drunk. You were just overcome with grief.
Joyce  I still keep up the grave with flowers.
Marlene  Do you really?
Joyce  Why wouldn't I?
Marlene  Have you seen Mother?
Joyce  Of course I've seen Mother.
Marlene  I mean lately.
Joyce  Of course I've seen her lately, I go every Thursday.
Marlene (to Angie)  Do you remember your grandfather?

Angie  He got me out of the bath one night in a towel.

Marlene  Did he? I don’t think he ever gave me a bath. Did he give you a bath, Joyce? He probably got soft in his old age. Did you like him?

Angie  Yes of course.

Marlene  Why?

Angie  What?

Marlene  So what’s the news? How’s Mrs Paisley? Still going crazily? / And Dorothy. What happened to Dorothy?*

Angie  Who’s Mrs Paisley?

Joyce  *She went to Canada.

Marlene  Did she? What to do?

Joyce  I don’t know. She just went to Canada.

Marlene  Well / good for her.

Angie  Mr Connolly killed his wife.

Marlene  What, Connolly at Whitegates?

Angie  They found her body in the garden. / Under the cabbages.

Marlene  He was always so proper.

Joyce  Stuck up git. Connolly. Best lawyer money could buy but he couldn’t get out of it. She was carrying on with Matthew.

Marlene  How old’s Matthew then?

Joyce  Twenty-one. / He’s got a motorbike.

Marlene  I think he’s about six.

Angie  How can he be six? He’s six years older than me. / If he was six I’d be nothing, I’d be just born this minute.
Joyce  Your aunty knows that, she’s just being silly. She means it’s so long since she’s been here she’s forgotten about Matthew.

Angie  You were here for my birthday when I was nine. I had a pink cake. Kit was only five then, she was four, she hadn’t started school yet. She could read already when she went to school. You remember my birthday? / You remember me?

Marlene  Yes, I remember the cake.

Angie  You remember me?

Marlene  Yes, I remember you.

Angie  And Mum and Dad was there, and Kit was.

Marlene  Yes, how is your dad? Where is he tonight? Up the pub?

Joyce  No, he’s not here.

Marlene  I can see he’s not here.

Joyce  He moved out.

Marlene  What? When did he? / Just recently?*

Angie  Didn’t you know that? You don’t know much.

Joyce  *No, it must be three years ago. Don’t be rude, Angie.

Angie  I’m not, am I Aunty? What else don’t you know?

Joyce  You was in America or somewhere. You sent a postcard.

Angie  I’ve got that in my room. It’s the Grand Canyon. Do you want to see it? Shall I get it? I can get it for you.

Marlene  Yes, all right.

Angie  goes.

Joyce  You could be married with twins for all I know. You must have affairs and break up and I don’t need to know about any of that so I don’t see what the fuss is about.
Marlene  What fuss?

Angie *comes back with the postcard.*

Angie  ‘Driving across the states for a new job in L.A. It’s a long way but the car goes very fast. It’s very hot. Wish you were here. Love from Aunty Marlene.’

Joyce  Did you make a lot of money?

Marlene  I spent a lot.

Angie  I want to go to America. Will you take me?

Joyce  She’s not going to America, she’s been to America, stupid.

Angie  She might go again, stupid. It’s not something you do once. People who go keep going all the time, back and forth on jets. They go on Concorde and Laker and get jet lag. Will you take me?

Marlene  I’m not planning a trip.

Angie  Will you let me know?

Joyce  Angie, / you’re getting silly.

Angie  I want to be American.

Joyce  It’s time you were in bed.

Angie  No it’s not. / I don’t have to go to bed at all tonight.

Joyce  School in the morning.

Angie  I’ll wake up.

Joyce  Come on now, you know how you get.

Angie  How do I get? / I don’t get anyhow.

Joyce  Angie. Are you staying the night?

Marlene  Yes, if that’s all right. / I’ll see you in the morning.

Angie  You can have my bed. I’ll sleep on the sofa.
Joyce   You will not, you’ll sleep in your bed. / Think I can’t
Angie   Mum.
Joyce   see through that? I can just see you going to sleep / with us talking.
Angie   I would, I would go to sleep, I’d love that.
Joyce   I’m going to get cross, Angie.
Angie   I want to show her something.
Joyce   Then bed.
Angie   It’s a secret.
Joyce   Then I expect it’s in your room so off you go. Give us a shout when you’re ready for bed and your aunty’ll be up and see you.
Angie   Will you?
Marlene  Yes of course.
Angie goes.
Silence.
It’s cold tonight.
Joyce   Will you be all right on the sofa? You can / have my bed.
Marlene  The sofa’s fine.
Joyce   Yes the forecast said rain tonight but it’s held off.
Marlene  I was going to walk down to the estuary but I’ve left it a bit late. Is it just the same?
Joyce   They cut down the hedges a few years back. Is that since you were here?
Marlene  But it’s not changed down the end, all the mud? And the reeds? We used to pick them when they were bigger than us. Are there still lapwings?
Joyce  You get strangers walking there on a Sunday. I expect they’re looking at the mud and the lapwings, yes.

Marlene  You could have left.

Joyce  Who says I wanted to leave?

Marlene  Stop getting at me then, you’re really boring.

Joyce  How could I have left?

Marlene  Did you want to?

Joyce  I said how, / how could I?

Marlene  If you’d wanted to you’d have done it.

Joyce  Christ.

Marlene  Are we getting drunk?

Joyce  Do you want something to eat?

Marlene  No, I’m getting drunk.

Joyce  Funny time to visit, Sunday evening.

Marlene  I came this morning. I spent the day.

Angie (off)  Aunty! Aunty Marlene!

Marlene  I’d better go.

Joyce  Go on then.

Marlene  All right.

Angie (off)  Aunty! Can you hear me? I’m ready.

Marlene goes.

Joyce goes on sitting.

Marlene comes back.

Joyce  So what’s the secret?

Marlene  It’s a secret.

Joyce  I know what it is anyway.
Marlene  I bet you don’t. You always said that.
Joyce  It’s her exercise book.
Marlene  Yes, but you don’t know what’s in it.
Joyce  It’s some game, some secret society she has with Kit.
Marlene  You don’t know the password. You don’t know the code.
Joyce  You’re really in it, aren’t you. Can you do the handshake?
Marlene  She didn’t mention a handshake.
Joyce  I thought they’d have a special handshake. She spends hours writing that but she’s useless at school. She copies things out of books about black magic, and politicians out of the paper. It’s a bit childish.
Marlene  I think it’s a plot to take over the world.
Joyce  She’s been in the remedial class the last two years.
Marlene  I came up this morning and spent the day in Ipswich. I went to see Mother.
Joyce  Did she recognise you?
Marlene  Are you trying to be funny?
Joyce  No, she does wander.
Marlene  She wasn’t wandering at all, she was very lucid thank you.
Joyce  You were very lucky then.
Marlene  Fucking awful life she’s had.
Joyce  Don’t tell me.
Marlene  Fucking waste.
Joyce  Don’t talk to me.
Marlene Why shouldn’t I talk? Why shouldn’t I talk to you? / Isn’t she my mother too?

Joyce Look, you’ve left, you’ve gone away, / we can do without you.

Marlene I left home, so what, I left home. People do leave home / it is normal.

Joyce We understand that, we can do without you.

Marlene We weren’t happy. Were you happy?

Joyce Don’t come back.

Marlene So it’s just your mother is it, your child, you never wanted me round, / you were jealous of me because I was the

Joyce Here we go.

Marlene little one and I was clever.

Joyce I’m not clever enough for all this psychology / if that’s what it is.

Marlene Why can’t I visit my own family / without all this?*

Joyce Aah.

*Just don’t go on about Mum’s life when you haven’t been to see her for how many years. / I go and see her every week.*

Marlene It’s up to me.

*Then don’t go and see her every week.

Joyce Somebody has to.

Marlene No they don’t. / Why do they?

Joyce How would I feel if I didn’t go?

Marlene A lot better.

Joyce I hope you feel better.

Marlene It’s up to me.
Joyce  You couldn’t get out of here fast enough.

Marlene  Of course I couldn’t get out of here fast enough. What was I going to do? Marry a dairyman who’d come home pissed? / Don’t you fucking this fucking that fucking bitch

Joyce  Christ.

Marlene  fucking tell me what to fucking do fucking.

Joyce  I don’t know how you could leave your own child.

Marlene  You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce  What does that mean?

Marlene  You were quick enough to take her.

Joyce  Or what? Have her put in a home? Have some stranger / take her would you rather?

Marlene  You couldn’t have one so you took mine.

Joyce  I didn’t know that then.

Marlene  Like hell, / married three years.

Joyce  I didn’t know that. Plenty of people / take that long.

Marlene  Well it turned out lucky for you, didn’t it?

Joyce  Turned out all right for you by the look of you. You’d be getting a few less thousand a year.

Marlene  Not necessarily.

Joyce  You’d be stuck here / like you said.

Marlene  I could have taken her with me.

Joyce  You didn’t want to take her with you. It’s no good coming back now, Marlene, / and saying –

Marlene  I know a managing director who’s got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because
she’s an extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money.

Joyce  So what’s that got to do with you at the age of seventeen?

Marlene  Just because you were married and had somewhere to live –

Joyce  You could have lived at home. / Or live with me

Marlene  Don’t be stupid.

Joyce  and Frank. / You said you weren’t keeping it. You

Marlene  You never suggested.

Joyce  shouldn’t have had it / if you wasn’t going to keep it.

Marlene  Here we go.

Joyce  You was the most stupid, / for someone so clever you
was the most stupid, get yourself pregnant, not go to the doctor, not tell.

Marlene  You wanted it, you said you were glad, I remember
the day, you said I’m glad you never got rid of it, I’ll look after it, you said that down by the river. So what are you saying, sunshine, you don’t want her?

Joyce  Course I’m not saying that.

Marlene  Because I’ll take her, / wake her up and pack now.

Joyce  You wouldn’t know how to begin to look after her.

Marlene  Don’t you want her?

Joyce  Course I do, she’s my child.

Marlene  Then what are you going on about / why did I have her?

Joyce  You said I got her off you / when you didn’t –

Marlene  I said you were lucky / the way it –
Joyce  Have a child now if you want one. You're not old.
Marlene  I might do.
Joyce  Good.

Pause.
Marlene  I've been on the pill so long / I'm probably sterile.
Joyce  Listen when Angie was six months I did get pregnant and I lost it because I was so tired looking after your fucking baby / because she cried so much -- yes I did tell
Marlene  You never told me.
Joyce  you -- and the doctor said if I'd sat down all day with
Marlene  Well I forgot.
Joyce  my feet up I'd've kept it / and that's the only chance I ever had because after that --
Marlene  I've had two abortions, are you interested? Shall I tell you about them? Well I won't, it's boring, it wasn't a problem. I don't like messy talk about blood / and what a bad
Joyce  If I hadn't had your baby. The doctor said.
Marlene  time we all had. I don't want a baby. I don't want to talk about gynaecology.
Joyce  Then stop trying to get Angie off of me.
Marlene  I come down here after six years. All night you've been saying I don't come often enough. If I don't come for another six years she'll be twenty-one, will that be OK?
Joyce  That'll be fine, yes, six years would suit me fine.
Pause.
Marlene  I was afraid of this.
I only came because I thought you wanted . . .
I just want . . .
Marlene cries.

Joyce  Don’t grizzle, Marlene, for God’s sake.

Marly? Come on, pet. Love you really.

Fucking stop it, will you?

Marlene  No, let me cry. I like it.

*They laugh, Marlene begins to stop crying.*

I knew I’d cry if I wasn’t careful.

Joyce  Everyone’s always crying in this house. Nobody takes any notice.

Marlene  You’ve been wonderful looking after Angie.

Joyce  Don’t get carried away.

Marlene  I can’t write letters but I do think of you.

Joyce  You’re getting drunk. I’m going to make some tea.

Marlene  Love you.

Joyce gets up to make tea.

Joyce  I can see why you’d want to leave. It’s a dump here.

Marlene  So what’s this about you and Frank?

Joyce  He was always carrying on, wasn’t he? And if I wanted to go out in the evening he’d go mad, even if it was nothing, a class, I was going to go to an evening class. So he had this girlfriend, only twenty-two poor cow, and I said go on, off you go, hoppit. I don’t think he even likes her.

Marlene  So what about money?

Joyce  I’ve always said I don’t want your money.

Marlene  No, does he send you money?

Joyce  I’ve got four different cleaning jobs. Adds up. There’s not a lot round here.
Marlene  Does Angie miss him?
Joyce   She doesn’t say.
Marlene  Does she see him?
Joyce   He was never that fond of her to be honest.
Marlene  He tried to kiss me once. When you were engaged.
Joyce   Did you fancy him?
Marlene  No, he looked like a fish.
Joyce   He was lovely then.
Marlene  Ugh.
Joyce   Well I fancied him. For about three years.
Marlene  Have you got someone else?
Joyce   There’s not a lot round here. Mind you, the minute you’re on your own, you’d be amazed how your friends’ husbands drop by. I’d sooner do without.
Marlene  I don’t see why you couldn’t take my money.
Joyce   I do, so don’t bother about it.
Marlene  Only got to ask.
Joyce   So what about you? Good job?
Marlene  Good for a laugh. / Got back from the US of A a bit
Joyce   Good for more than a laugh I should think.
Marlene  wiped out and slotted into this speedy employment agency and still there.
Joyce   You can always find yourself work then.
Marlene  That’s right.
Joyce   And men?
Marlene  Oh there’s always men.
Joyce  No one special?

Marlene  There’s fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows they’ve got something really good in their pants. But they can’t take the day to day. They’re waiting for me to turn into the little woman. Or maybe I’m just horrible of course.

Joyce  Who needs them?

Marlene  Who needs them? Well I do. But I need adventures more. So on on into the sunset. I think the eighties are going to be stupendous.

Joyce  Who for?

Marlene  For me. / I think I’m going up up up.

Joyce  Oh for you. Yes, I’m sure they will.

Marlene  And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She’s a tough lady, Maggie. I’d give her a job. / She just needs to hang in there. This country

Joyce  You voted for them, did you?

Marlene  needs to stop whining. / Monetarism is not stupid.

Joyce  Drink your tea and shut up, pet.

Marlene  It takes time, determination. No more slop. / And

Joyce  Well I think they’re filthy bastards.


Joyce  What good’s first woman if it’s her? I suppose you’d have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures.

Marlene  Bosses still walking on the workers’ faces? Still Dadda’s little parrot? Haven’t you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.
Joyce  I am looking at you.

Marlene  Come on, Joyce, we’re not going to quarrel over politics.

Joyce  We are though.

Marlene  Forget I mentioned it. Not a word about the slimy unions will cross my lips.

Pause.

Joyce  You say Mother had a wasted life.

Marlene  Yes I do. Married to that bastard.

Joyce  What sort of life did he have? / Working in the fields like

Marlene  Violent life?

Joyce  an animal. / Why wouldn’t he want a drink?

Marlene  Come off it.

Joyce  You want a drink. He couldn’t afford whisky.

Marlene  I don’t want to talk about him.

Joyce  You started, I was talking about her. She had a rotten life because she had nothing. She went hungry.

Marlene  She was hungry because he drank the money. / He used to hit her.

Joyce  It’s not all down to him. / Their lives were rubbish. They

Marlene  She didn’t hit him.

Joyce  were treated like rubbish. He’s dead and she’ll die soon and what sort of life / did they have?

Marlene  I saw him one night. I came down.

Joyce  Do you think I didn’t? / They didn’t get to America and

Marlene  I still have dreams.
Joyce drive across it in a fast car. / Bad nights, they had bad days.

Marlene America, America, you’re jealous. / I had to get out,

Joyce Jealous?

Marlene I knew when I was thirteen, out of their house, out of them, never let that happen to me, / never let him, make my own way, out.

Joyce Jealous of what you’ve done, you’re ashamed of me if I came to your office, your smart friends, wouldn’t you, I’m ashamed of you, think of nothing but yourself, you’ve got on, nothing’s changed for most people / has it?

Marlene I hate the working class / which is what you’re going

Joyce Yes you do.

Marlene to go on about now, it doesn’t exist any more, it means lazy and stupid. / I don’t like the way they talk. I don’t

Joyce Come on, now we’re getting it.

Marlene like beer guts and football vomit and saucy tits / and brothers and sisters –

Joyce I spit when I see a Rolls Royce, scratch it with my ring / Mercedes it was.

Marlene Oh very mature –

Joyce I hate the cows I work for / and their dirty dishes with blanquette of fucking veau.

Marlene and I will not be pulled down to their level by a flying picket and I won’t be sent to Siberia / or a loony bin

Joyce No, you’ll be on a yacht, you’ll be head of Coca-Cola and you wait, the eighties is going to be stupendous all right because we’ll get you lot off our backs –
Marlene just because I’m original. And I support Reagan even if he is a lousy movie star because the reds are swarming up his map and I want to be free in a free world -

Joyce What? / What?

Marlene I know what I mean / by that – not shut up here.

Joyce So don’t be round here when it happens because if someone’s kicking you I’ll just laugh.

Silence.

Marlene I don’t mean anything personal. I don’t believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they’ve got what it takes.

Joyce And if they haven’t?

Marlene If they’re stupid or lazy or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I?

Joyce What about Angie?

Marlene What about Angie?

Joyce She’s stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?

Marlene You run her down too much. She’ll be all right.

Joyce I don’t expect so, no. I expect her children will say what a wasted life she had. If she has children. Because nothing’s changed and it won’t with them in.

Marlene Them, them. / Us and them?

Joyce And you’re one of them.

Marlene And you’re us, wonderful us, and Angie’s us / and Mum and Dad’s us.

Joyce Yes, that’s right, and you’re them.

Marlene Come on, Joyce, what a night. You’ve got what it takes.

Joyce I know I have.
Marlene  I didn’t really mean all that.
Joyce  I did.
Marlene  But we’re friends anyway.
Joyce  I don’t think so, no.
Marlene  Well it’s lovely to be out in the country. I really must make the effort to come more often.
I want to go to sleep.
I want to go to sleep.
Joyce gets blankets for the sofa.
Joyce  Goodnight then. I hope you’ll be warm enough.
Marlene  Goodnight. Joyce –
Joyce  No, pet. Sorry.
Joyce goes.
Marlene sits wrapped in a blanket and has another drink.
Angie comes in.
Angie  Mum?
Marlene  Angie? What’s the matter?
Angie  Mum?
Marlene  No, she’s gone to bed. It’s Aunty Marlene.
Angie  Frightening.
Marlene  Did you have a bad dream? What happened in it? Well you’re awake now, aren’t you pet?
Angie  Frightening.
Notes

Act One

1 *Frascati*: popular Italian dry white wine.

1 *Hawaii*: a group of islands in the Pacific Ocean – the ‘ideal’ holiday destination – whose capital is Honolulu. Discovered by Captain Cook in 1778, they were originally named the Sandwich Islands. Annexed by the USA in 1898, they became that country’s fiftieth state in 1959.

1 *Tobermory*: a small Scottish burgh (i.e. borough) on the north coast of the island of Mull, Argyllshire.

1 *miss its face*: miss seeing her. The use of ‘its’ is patronising.

2 *sake*: (also saki, or sakki) Japan’s chief alcoholic drink, similar to beer but clearer in texture and made from fermented rice.

2 *Let the wild goose come to me this spring*: metaphorical allusion meaning bring her (Nijo) to my bed.

3 *metaphysical poets*: school of English poets of the early seventeenth century whose work is characterised by concision, ingenious, often highly intricate word-play (known as ‘conceits’) and striking imagery. The best-known exponent was John Donne (1571–1631) whose early love poetry gave way to the writing of religious sonnets when he took holy orders and, later, became Dean of St Paul’s in London.

3 *hymnology*: study of the history and composition of religious hymns.

4 *without matter*: without physical substance.

5 *Waldorf salad*: a salad of apple, celery and walnuts.

5 *John the Scot*: John Duns ‘Scotus’, thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian. His date indicates the extent of Churchill’s inventiveness with regard to Pope Joan, who didn’t really exist.
5 Canelloni: Italian pasta dish.
5 Avocado vinaigrette: large pear-shaped fruit, usually served in half with a dressing of oil and vinegar.
6 Buddhism . . . in Japan: the Buddhist religion originated in India around 500 BC and derives from the teachings of Buddha, whose most important doctrine is that of karma – good or evil deeds reaping an appropriate reward in this life or (through reincarnation) a succession of lives. The main divisions are Theravada in South-East Asia and Mahayana in North Asia. Lamaism in Tibet and Zen in Japan are among the many Mahayana sects.
6 Mahayana sutras: Buddhistic textbooks.
7 brace: refresh, stimulate.
8 acacias: one of a large group of shrubs and trees belonging to the pea family. Acacias include the thorn trees of the African savannah and the gum Arabic tree of North Africa.
8 the Sandwich Isles: see note on Hawaii (p. 98). When Captain Cook named the Pacific islands it was in honour of Lord Sandwich, who also lent his name to the common snack.
9 Lady Betto: court lady, contemporary of Nijo.
11 one of the three lower realms: the lowest of six realms into which the human spirit can be reborn according to Buddhist thought.
11 St Augustine: St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) (not to be confused with St Augustine, Archbishop of Canterbury, who died in 604). Among his many writings are his Confessions, a spiritual autobiography, and The City of God, which sets out, in twenty-two books, to vindicate the Christian Church and Divine Providence.
11 Neo-Platonic Ideas: ‘Ideal Forms’ derived from the Greek philosopher Plato (426–347 BC), a pupil of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle. He was the author of philosophical dialogues on such topics as metaphysics, ethics and politics. Central to his teaching is the notion of ‘Ideal Forms’ which he located outside the everyday world and which, for him, constituted ‘ideal’ versions of reality. The
nature of these ideas subsequently lent themselves conveniently to religious modes of thought. In Neoplatonism, after death all life returns to its original source where it is stripped of individual identity, a process called *henosis*. In Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, *theosis* gives the individual the possibility of uniting with God in divine eternal union.

11 *Denys the Areopagite* . . . *the pseudo-Denys*: pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (also known as the pseudo-Denys) was an anonymous theologian and philosopher of the late fifth century. One of his most important works, *Corpus Areopagiticus*, was mistakenly attributed to someone of the same name who was known as Dionysius the Areopagite, a convert to Christianity mentioned in the Bible by St Paul (Acts 17:34). The real Denys’s works are mystical and show a strong Neoplatonic influence. Although the validity of his thinking has now been accepted by Catholic theologians, many of his claims are known to have been false, such as his having witnessed the solar eclipse at Christ’s crucifixion and of having seen Christ’s mother, when he obviously wasn’t around at the time! An areopagite was a member of the Areopagus, an open-air court situated on a hill in Athens in Greece, the highest court in the land. It was a site of public rhetorical declamation and has become associated, historically, with the idea of free speech. The English poet John Milton’s *Areopagitica*, written in 1644, is an impassioned plea for freedom of the press.

12 *carbuncles*: malignant boils on the skin.
12 *erysipelas*: inflammation of the skin.
12 *anaemia*: lack of blood, or of red corpuscles in the blood.
13 *bathchair*: invalid chair on wheels.
13 *gout*: disease characterised by painful inflammation of the smaller joints.
13 *Jaeger flannel*: a woven patterned tweed. The trade name carries associations of aristocratic taste and expense.
14 *muleteers*: mule-drivers.
offer a horse to Buddha: a sacrifice, in the hope of a miracle.
chamberlain: steward.
Theodora of Alexandria: St Theodora of Alexandria (474–91) committed adultery, then, overcome with remorse, disguised herself as a man and took holy orders. She was accepted into a monastery where she took the name of Theodore. A woman who subsequently visited the monastery accused ‘him’ of impregnating her but, instead of defending herself, Theodora adopted the child as her own. Her son later became an abbot. Theodore’s true sex was not discovered until her death. Her husband attended her funeral before himself taking holy orders and taking up residence in the monastic cell formerly occupied by his late wife.
Rogation Day: one of the three days before Ascension Day when litanies of the saints were chanted in procession.
St Peter’s to go to St John’s: San Pietro in Vaticano is St Peter’s cathedral in the Vatican City, Rome. Considered the mother church of the Catholic community, it is a Renaissance and Baroque edifice built over an earlier structure erected by the Emperor Constantine in 319, over the supposed grave of the apostle Peter. San Giovanni in Laterano (St John’s) is the papal bishop’s church and is the earliest Roman church building, dating from 313. The only other St John’s church in Rome is the Santo Giovanni in Fonte, which stands at the southern end of the Lateran basilica and was also built by Emperor Constantine, who was responsible for bringing Rome within the orbit of the Christian Church.
St Clement’s and the Colosseum: the church of Santo Clemente is known to have existed as early as the third century, although the present building dates from the early twelfth century. The Colosseum (Colosseo) is, as its name suggests, huge – a massive amphitheatre dating from Roman times, much of which remains standing despite fires, earthquakes and looting. It could accommodate over
70,000 spectators to watch gladiatorial contests, animal
hunts and even mock naval battles.

19 *Antichrist*: diabolical being opposed to the true Messiah.
19 *bay*: reddish brown.
19 *Rocky Mountains*: a vast mountain range in western Canada and the USA extending from the Yukon to New Mexico.

20 *bronco*: untamed horse.
21 *anorexic*: suffering from an eating disorder that reduces appetite.

22 *Brueghel*: one of a family of Flemish painters, Pieter Brueghel (1515–69) was known as the ‘Elder’ and is now recognised as one of the greatest artists of his time. Noted for his satirical depiction of everyday life among the peasantry, he was also a wonderful landscape painter, evident in a series of paintings based on the months of the year of which the most famous is perhaps *Hunters in the Snow*. Some of his last works are considered among his finest, for instance, *Dulle Griet*, a satanic landscape peopled by all the devils of medieval folklore, and *The Triumph of Death*, with its depiction of the almost mechanical destruction of human life, which confirms the permanent influence on his work of Hieronymous Bosch.

22 *Boccaccio*: Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) was an Italian poet whose best-known work is *The Decameron*, a hundred tales told by ten young people seeking refuge in the countryside during time of plague. Their bawdiness and exuberance, as well as narrative skill and characterisation, made this work both popular and influential, inspiring, among others, the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer.

22 *Petrarch*: Francisco Petrarca (1304–74) was an Italian poet who, in composing love poems to his divine Laura, popularised the fourteen-line sonnet whose strict form was imported into England by the sixteenth-century poets, the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt. The form was imitated with great success by Sir Philip Sidney and then further modified and anglicised by William Shakespeare in
his great cycle of sonnets dedicated to ‘Mr W.H. and the Dark Lady’.

22 Chaucer: Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) was an English poet and author of The Canterbury Tales, a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims during the course of a journey to visit the shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. He writes in Middle English, the transitional form of the language, which developed from Anglo-Saxon and was close to modern English. Literature at that time was usually written in French, understood by the nobility. By writing in the demotic, Chaucer opened his work to a much wider audience. His other work includes the French-influenced Romance of the Rose and an adaptation of Boccaccio’s Troilus and Criseyde.

22 profiteroles: Italian dessert, cream-filled balls of choux pastry covered with chocolate.

22 Zabaglione: Italian dessert, egg yolks, sugar and marsala wine whipped together.

29 Suave, mari magno . . . (Joan’s Latin): taken from Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura, II, lines 1–18, 45–7, 52, 55–9. Greg Giesekam translates as follows:

   It’s pleasing, when over a swollen sea winds are stirring up the waters, to watch from the shore another’s peril: not because his troubles are a cause of delight or joy, but because it’s pleasing to recognise what troubles you are free from yourself. It’s just as pleasing to witness battle being waged across a plain, when you’re out of danger yourself. But nothing is more delightful than to occupy the calm of an ivory tower built on the teachings of wise men; from here you can look down on others as they wander about seeking some path through life, as they strive to be clever, to out-do each other in reputation, battling night and day to get to the top of the pile with their power and wealth. What miserable minds men have! How blind their hearts are! To waste their brief span of life in darkness, in peril! Don’t they see all nature needs is for life to be lived without physical pain,
while the mind, freed from cares, enjoys a sense of delight?

30 *We come into hell through a big mouth*: this remark contains a reference to the medieval mystery plays of fourteenth-century Europe, some of which were acted out on extended stages built in front of cathedral buildings, on which the biblical version of Man’s origins and eventual ‘fall’, his death and resurrection were enacted against the background of a number of ‘mansions’ or permanent settings. The setting for Paradise was always at the furthest point stage-right while ‘Hell’s Mouth’ was always placed furthest stage-left and was usually represented by the gaping maw of some monster which served as both the entry point for those who were permanently damned as well as an exit point for those saved at the Day of Judgment.

31 *the Spanish*: Spanish armies invaded and occupied the Netherlands during the sixteenth century. Their ports were attacked by Sir Francis Drake. He later commanded the English forces who defeated the Spanish Armada, which attempted an invasion of Britain in 1588.

31 *die on a wheel*: a reference to the medieval practice of torturing people to death tied to a wheel.

32 *Berber sheikhs*: the Berbers are a people of North Africa who, since prehistoric times, have inhabited the Mediterranean coastlands between Egypt and the Atlantic. Their language is spoken by about one-third of Algerians and nearly two-thirds of Moroccans. A ‘sheikh’ would have been a Berber leader.

**Act Two**

33 The Exterminator: the first of two violent films made in 1980 (the other being *Exterminator 2*), both starring Robert Ginty as an avenging veteran of the Vietnam War on the trail of a murderous gang and, in Part 2, a mysterious master criminal who uses brutal combat skills, learned in the army, to achieve his goals.
33 *It's X, innit:* at the time, an ‘X’ certificate given to a film meant that you had to be over eighteen to be allowed in to the cinema to see it. The expression ‘innit’ (a contraction of ‘isn’t it?’) is an attempt to convey popular vernacular speech.

38 *Your skin’s burned right off:* this was an effect of napalm, used by the American forces fighting the North Vietnamese during the 1960s and 1970s. However, what Kit’s reference to finding out where they were going ‘to drop it’ seems to infer is the effect of a nuclear attack and the consequences of the fireball which occurred when the atomic bomb was first used against the civilian population of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1946. The possible recurrence of an event like this haunted people of Caryl Churchill’s generation, especially during the years of the so-called ‘Cold War’, with the invention of powerful hydrogen weapons and ever more sophisticated means of delivering them.

43 *Third year? Second year:* classes in secondary school covering twelve- to fourteen-year-olds, now termed Year 9 and Year 8.

46 *West Sussex:* affluent area of the Home Counties, close to London.

45 *Marilyn. Esther’s Baby. They’re all called after birds:* ‘birds’, a sexist reference to young women, in this case the Hollywood film-star icon, Marilyn Monroe, whose name was synonymous with sexual allure, and, because of the reference to swimming pools, another Hollywood star who was invariably clad in a swimsuit, Esther Williams, who appeared in films with titles such as *Dangerous When Wet* (1953).

47 *Elvis:* Elvis Presley, American singer.

47 *John Conteh:* a Liverpudlian boxer born in 1951 to an Irish mother and Sierra Leonean father. In October 1974, he became the first British boxer for a quarter of a century to win the World Light Heavyweight Championship – a title which he held for four years before quitting the ring in 1980.
47 *pirate*: person or company tempting Nell away from the ‘Top Girls’ agency with an offer of either more money or better prospects or both.

48 *Prestel*: computerised information service: a large business extension of British Telecom.

48 *IBM*: International Business Machines, a large corporation.

49 *Dymchurch*: a small town in Kent on the edge of Romney Marsh, famous for its light railway which ran via New Romney and Hythe to the lighthouses at Dungeness.

49 *the change*: menopause.

49 *Ovaltine*: bedtime malt-flavoured milky drink.

50 *Ascot*: a small town in Berkshire, near Windsor Great Park, famous for its racecourse, especially the annual Ascot Week patronised by race-going members of the British upper class, where the men traditionally wear morning dress of grey top hat and tails while the ladies wear large, expensive hats and extremely smart dresses. The race is traditionally patronised by the royal family who are driven down the course in an open carriage.

51 *Pam’s ladies*: clients of ‘Pam’, a colleague of the office women who does not appear onstage.

52 *Os and As*: ‘Ordinary’ and ‘Advanced’ level subject passes in the General Certificate of Education taken in British schools until 1987, at sixteen and eighteen years of age.

52 *Speeds*: clerical skills, typing and shorthand speeds.

53 *Secretary or typist*: Marlene distinguishes. A secretary usually has more responsibility than a typist.

53 *Hundred*: one hundred pounds per week. A decent wage in 1982 for a twenty-year-old.

55 *a multinational*: a company whose financial interests and activities extend beyond the country where it is ostensibly based to embrace the globe, with outposts and manufacturing sites in several countries often chosen because labour costs are cheaper and, therefore, profits greater.

55 *Madame Tussaud’s*: a waxwork museum located in central London. Madame Tussaud (born Anne-Marie Grosholtz, 1760–1850) was a French wax modeller who, in 1802,
established an exhibition of wax models of famous people on the Strand thoroughfare in London. This transferred to Baker Street and thence, in 1884, to the Marylebone Road where it remains to this day. Its ‘Chamber of Horrors’ with wax effigies of famous murderers is especially notorious.

67 *six basic and three commission*: six thousand pounds per year as salary, with three thousand added as a reward for successful selling.

67 *closing*: clinching the deal, completing the sale.

69 *Younghness*: Shona’s lack of education is here suggested by her using the wrong word — it should be ‘youthfulness’ — as well as her redundant repetition of the phrase ‘in our family’.

69 *My present job at present*: another example of Shona’s use of repetitive phrases. This speech shows the influence of Harold Pinter on Churchill’s writing at this stage in her career. Compare, for example, some of Mick’s speeches in *The Caretaker* or Lenny’s speeches in *The Homecoming*, which contain a similar blend of fantasy and comic pretentiousness.

70–1 *Who’s sitting in my chair? Who’s been eating my porridge?*: a reference to the children’s story of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’, in which these questions are asked by Father, Mother and Baby Bear, who return from the forest to find their home occupied by Goldilocks. She has not only been sitting in each of their chairs in turn but has also sampled their porridge and eaten all of Baby Bear’s helping. She is then discovered sleeping in Baby Bear’s bed but, happily, manages to make good her escape.

71 *I was headhunted*: a reference to the tendency of unscrupulous firms to poach successful, usually commercially aggressive personnel from their business rivals by offering them inducements, financial and other, in order to recruit them. The term derives from warfare among primitive tribes of cannibals.
71 CSE: Certificate of Secondary Education (less prestigious than O level in 1982).

72 Coca-Cola in Russia and Pepsi-cola in China: one would expect both brands to be competing in both markets. However, the suggestion here is that, like the oil companies and other large multinationals, capitalist enterprises which are supposed to represent free-market competition in actual fact enter into agreements with each other not to compete but to share, or divide, world markets between themselves, thus maximising the selling price for their particular product.

73 Violins?: refers to the musical accompaniment to sad moments in silent films.

73 Packer in Tesco: Tesco’s the supermarket chain. A packer fills the shelves – a menial task.

Act Three

82 Grand Canyon: a vast gorge in Arizona, USA, containing the Colorado River. It is 217 miles long, more than a mile deep in places and between four to eighteen miles wide.

83 L.A.: Los Angeles (literally City of the Angels), a port in California famous for its Long Beach and its suburb, Hollywood, the headquarters of the American film industry.

83 Concorde: the only successful supersonic airliner, it was capable of flying at twice the speed of sound. The result of Anglo-French cooperation, it made its maiden flight in 1969 before entering commercial service seven years later. However, despite halving the time between Europe and America, the aircraft proved to be uncommercial and, following a serious crash in the year 2000 resulting from design flaws, the aircraft was eventually withdrawn from service in 2003.

83 Laker: Sir Freddie Laker (1922–2006) was the founder of Laker Airways in 1966, the first budget airline to offer ‘no frills’ flights at low cost – a model which has been successfully imitated by other budget airlines since. His company went spectacularly bust in 1982.
jet lag: a condition of exhaustion and confusion experienced by long-distance jet travellers as a result of crossing different time zones.

lapwings: birds of the plover family known both as the green plover and as the peewit (because of its call). It inhabits moorland in Europe and Asia and scratches its nest in the ground.

Maggie: Margaret Thatcher (see p. xxxvii).

Monetarism: economic policy distinguished by control of the money supply (see p. xxxvii).

Hitler: Adolf Hitler (real name Shicklgrueber, 1889–1945), the German dictator of Austrian origin who became Fuhrer (leader) of the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party in 1921 and was elected Chancellor of Germany in 1933. His ideology, based on German Nationalism and anti-Semitism, was set out in his book Mein Kampf (My Struggle) written between 1925 and 1927.

the slimy unions: a contemptuous reference to the Trade Union Movement – organisations of employed workers first formed during the nineteenth century to undertake collective bargaining with employers to try to achieve improved working conditions for their members. The British Labour Party grew out of the Trade Union Movement but the failed General Strike of 1926 showed the extent to which the Labour Party and the trade unions had diverged. Their comparative power and influence after the Second World War increased and strike action brought down the Conservative government of Edward Heath in the early 1970s. The Thatcher administration after 1979 set out to curb their power through government legislation aimed, in particular, at the powerful Miners’ Union. The failure of the Miners’ Strike in 1984 led to a subsequent decline in trade union influence in Britain’s political affairs.

blanquette of fucking veau: in the language of French haute cuisine, a blanquette de veau is a dish of white veal
in a white sauce, derived from the French word *blanc*, meaning white.

95 *a flying picket*: trade unionists who support strikes at places of work other than their own. This action was made illegal by the Thatcher administration and contributed to the further weakening of the trade unions. The legislation confined strike action to a particular workplace, banned ‘sympathy’ strikes and prohibited other workers from rallying at the site of the strike (known as ‘secondary picketing’). It also made the particular strike action subject to a secret ballot of members of the local workforce.

95 *sent to Siberia*: sent into exile. In Russia, from the nineteenth century, convicts and political prisoners were often sentenced to hard labour in this remote eastern area of the continent where living conditions were extreme, especially in winter, when temperatures could drop to as low as minus 40 degrees centigrade.

96 *Reagan . . . free world*: Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) was a Hollywood film actor of the 1940s and 1950s who became Governor of California (1967–75), before being elected fortieth President of the United States and serving two terms (1981–89). After surviving an assassination attempt early in his presidency, he espoused a form of unfettered free-market politics, colloquially known as ‘Reaganomics’, which found an enthusiastic ally in the person of the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

96 *reds*: communists. Ronald Reagan was a staunch anti-communist and even labelled the Soviet Union an ‘evil empire’.