

First draft

Interrogations

No man dies for what he knows to be true. Men die for what they want to be true, for what some terror in their hearts tells them is not true.

-- **Oscar Wilde**, *The Portrait of Mr. W H.*

Characters:

- John – ex art teacher. Early 70s. Married to Mary.
- John's double (could be a sound only)
- Mary – ex English teacher. Late 60s. Married to John
- Rachel – their daughter
- Graham – Rachel's husband.
- David Sanderson – family GP
- Geraldine Jones - psychiatrist

Time – present

The action is in short scenes with black out between. The action/ delivery should gradually speed up towards to end.

Lights come up on Mary, Rachel and Graham coming to a middle class sitting room from a funeral, dressed soberly. Comfortable place. A French window with double doors centre back. Garden seen through. Books/paintings etc.. A table with drinks. There are two armchairs. Coffee table.

Rachel: It's done. Went off as well as we could have hoped. Better.

Mary: Yes. It went off. I suppose that's what it did.

Rachel: I think there were some puzzled people there wondering about it. It was sudden.

Mary: Perhaps a bloody release for everyone. I didn't understand what he was on about. For all that time, then . . . I don't understand the effect it has had on us all. On me.

Rachel: You are not alone in that, Mum.

Mary: But, yes, it was done. It's done. It was done. I did it.

Graham: I can't get my head round it. A heart attack just when he seemed to be coming out of that . . .that . . .whatever it was. And he wasn't unwell. Was he?

Mary: High blood pressure and heart murmur. Refused all medication. So.

Well there we are. We must look after ourselves. Let's have a drink or two. A large scotch for me I think. And then some more.

To black

Lights up on Mary sitting on one of the armchairs reading a paper. A man stands in the middle of the room but looking out into the garden.

John: I saw a bird.

Mary: *(continues to read the paper)*: I saw a bird. I've seen lots of birds.

John: I didn't know it was a bird. I saw a thing that travelled from one place to another. But I couldn't think what it was at the time. I think I know now.

Mary: You mean you didn't recognise it? What colour was it? How big?

John: A small thing. Blue or yellow. Or both I think.

Mary: Blue tit. Lots of them about.

John: I mean I didn't recognise it as a bird. I didn't know what it was. It must have been a bird. I suppose it was a blue tit.

Mary: Have another look. You'll see swarms of the buggers.

John: You're not getting it. I saw this thing moving across in front of me and I didn't know what it was. I don't mean the species. I mean what kind of thing it was.

Mary: *(puts paper down and looks at John)*: I sometimes look at you and can't think what kind of thing you are.

John: If you are going to . . . *(he laughs at the joke)* But it was a strange feeling. All I saw was a mass of matter moving through another mass of matter. And I couldn't

name either. There was something magical about it. I was full of wonder for a moment.

Mary (*folds her paper, stands up, puts the paper on the seat of her chair*): I know what I can name right now and it begins with S. Join me in a scotch?

John (*wistfully still looking out of the window*): Yes . . . thank you . . . that would be good.

(*Mary goes to a table where there are bottles and glasses and pours two generous scotches*)

John: Do you know there are people around who can't recognise faces? I mean even people they know. They just can't see who they are. They see a person - maybe a spouse or something and they don't know who they are until they speak. Maybe I'm like that with birds. I'll look it up.

(*Goes to a table and picks up his phone. Taps and flicks through. Suddenly spots what he wants*).

There we are. Prosopagnosia, face blindness. Perhaps I have Birdiagnosia. Sounds about right. But that doesn't do it. It's not being unable to recognise a bird but unable to see exactly what it is. A thingy. A whatsit.

Mary: Don't let it worry you. You are an elderly gentleman. At your time of life not knowing what a bird is will not disturb your existence in the world. (*looks at him steadily while handing him his glass*). I don't suppose.

(*She sits down again and continues to look at him*)

Do you recognise me?

John: Er . . . yes . . . of course. You are . . . Mary.

To black

Same scene.

Mary is looking out of the window. A doorbell rings. She goes out of a side door, there is bustle and voices – two female voices. Mary comes in and a woman in her 30's follows energetically. This is her daughter Rachel who is pregnant. She is dressed for outdoors and carrying shopping bags.

Rachel: Well that has been quite an afternoon! I've been rushed off my feet. And all for the little menace's birthday. Did you go through all this when I was a kid - parties for what seems like a thousand screaming children - the cakes and fizz? The bloody games? I bet you didn't. Well we all have to do it these days. Still it'll all be

over this time tomorrow bar the clearing the dead from the battlefield. Where's pop?

Mary: He went out for a walk.

Rachel: He OK?

Mary: Yes he's fine. I think. No - he's OK. We're both getting old and slightly weird these days which seems normal to me.

Rachel: I would invite you both for tomorrow's binge but I think it would not quite suit.

Mary: Be good to see the mayhem - from a distance, looking in through the window with masks on perhaps - but not a complete engagement on the front line. And next year and for ever and ever you will have two of them to deal with.

How's Graham?

(Rachel is bustling about, putting her bags down and taking off her coat and scarf)

Rachel: Alright. This bump is going to be a bit of a strain to carry around during the celebrations. But don't remind me. There's more to come. After the shindig tomorrow we are entertaining his cousin James and partner on Monday. Another show of hospitality I could do without. They are in London for some reason and we are obliged. They can be a bit of hard work. The silent types.

Where did Pop go?

Mary: He used to just trot for a couple of blocks, take a turn around the park and come home. Half an hour at most. Now he is out for longer. Maybe he is just getting slower.

Rachel: Shall I make some tea.

Mary: Yes - do.

(Rachel goes out the other door and rattles crockery. It goes quiet. She comes back in and stands at the door.)

Rachel: What do you mean 'weird'?

Mary: O - Dad? Nothing much. He drifts about sometimes looking a bit lost. Then he has been saying he doesn't see things as they were. Can't name them. I can't really get what he means. Nothing very serious I would think. At his age.

Rachel: You sure? It sounds a bit disturbing to me. How old is he now?

Mary: 72.

Rachel (*she goes out for the tea and calls back*): Maybe he should get a test or something. Get a diagnosis if needed. You don't want it developing into something even more 'weird'.

Mary: Well - maybe you are right. I'll put it to him but I don't think he'll go for it. His brain is still tickety-boo. He zips through the cryptic crossword in no time. He just says he is seeing things differently. But he finds it impossible to say how.

Rachel (*comes in with a tea tray*): It's not about something between you and him?

Mary: O no. We bump along reasonably well. Maybe he's bored. He's stopped painting you know. All the paints have gone hard on the palette. I find him looking at all the gear at times. As if he doesn't know what it is all for.

(Sound of front door opening and closing.)

That sounds like him now.

(John enters having taken off his top coat.)

Rachel: Hi Pop. Mum says you are getting weird.

Mary: Rachel!

John: Well - she should know if anyone does.

Rachel: Do you feel weird?

John: No - I don't. (*Pause – dreamily*) I feel as though I am... not - me - *Pause* - I suppose that's weird. I mean . . . I mean . . . I don't know what I mean. Second childhood? But it feels alright. Don't worry. I'm sure to work it out. Whatever it is. Let's say it's that I seem to see everything in a different way than before.

Rachel: She says you have stopped painting.

John: Yes. Came to a halt a few months ago. I just found myself looking at the thing in front of me and whatever it was seem to somehow disappear. Or I didn't understand what it was.

Mary: There you are. That's what he says a lot now. 'I didn't know what I was looking at'. You say you're OK with all this Darling, but Rachel has suggested it might be wise to have you checked over. It may be something happening which could develop into a problem. Best to catch these things early. What do you think?

John: (*mildly annoyed*) I am not crackers. I am not losing my memory. I am definitely not NOT seeing things. I am seeing them differently that's all.

Rachel: Don't get angry Pops. Have a think about it. Could be a wise move.

John: Yes, yes – sorry about that. But I am rather mystified by the whole thing. I'll give it a week or so and reconsider. But I really don't want to go down the medical rabbit hole of tests and tests and more tests. Not for me. Not now. Not ever!

To black

A strong greenish spot light suddenly comes on straight down from above. It reveals John standing centre stage. He looks out at the audience and addresses them directly.

I'm in the park. Where I usually come. I used to sit on a bench under that very large plane tree over there and just ponder. Or look at the kids playing. That has become a dangerous game in these days. Could be accused of all sorts. Pity. Now I don't stay still for very long. It's because my body has drifted from me. I have the voice in my head going on and on. This voice. You can hear it from where you are. I am told it is part of my whole material self. It just doesn't feel like it - never did. I am going to have to play the game of pretending it's separate - the voice I mean. The voice I cannot stop. Separate from this bag of matter which it's resting on top of. My brain, I know, manipulates my perceptions - what's useful, what's not. An evolved system over which I have no control. But those perceptions are all I have - all you have - to work with. So be it. I am told I have lungs and a heart and a liver and all the rest, all tucked away neatly. Although I have never seen any of it. And arms and legs. And the bones of course. And the skin. And my cock and balls and buttocks. I know they are there. Now I look down and can't understand it. The feet at the end of the legs, standing on the – ground. And every now and then lately I no longer recognise them under their labels. Arms, legs, feet. And the ground? What is it?

The black

Light comes up on the same sitting room, now transformed into a dining area. A table is set and John, Mary, Rachel and Graham are coming to the end of a meal. Dessert plates and spoon, wine bottles and glasses etc.

Graham: Well – yes. We did survive the visit from James and Lizzie last week. We were both exhausted with the enormously tiring job of making conversation. He’s always been like that and he married a woman who is like a mirror image of him, character-wise. It’s like playing tennis with no-one on the other side of the net.

Rachel: It does help having access to a decent flow of booze. And the early part was livened up by the Menace - before he was sent to bed.

Graham: But they are harmless and pleasant in their way. It’s this strange endlessly changing variations on a theme don’t you think – dinner parties? Here we are having chatted away merrily for a couple of hours, when last week the couple of hours seemed like trudging through mud for 7 or 8. Same scenario with different actors.

John: I think you are right. The whole thing is odd isn’t it? The chatting and eating thing and the drinking thing. I have a theory which is absolutely correct - (*he looks around waiting for a comment. Mary indicates with weary gesture that he should carry on*) - that human chatter is the equivalent of chimpanzees grooming each other. Mostly what we talk about is of no significance whatsoever but it sort of binds us in our little tribe. Not that we talk trivia all the time. Well I don’t.

Mary (*gently mocking*): Of course you don’t, dear. You are the most scintillating conversationalist I have ever come across. But do stop now and get some brandy glasses and the bottle.

John: It’s not just the talk ether. I have recently been thinking about eating. You know – shoving matter into our faces and waiting for the innards to do their magic and get rid of it, transformed, in the way we all know and love.

Rachel: O come on Dad! There’s more to it than that.

John: The more that there is to it is that we cover a great deal of our natural and sometimes disgusting behaviour with a patina we call civilisation. It’s a cover up job we all partake in, pretending we know what we are and what we are doing. And pretending it is all beautiful. For all the gastronomical prophets and cook books in the world can no longer disguise the fact that eating is shoving material into our gobs and shitting it out a few hours later. Sole purpose? - to keep us alive.

Mary: Come on love, that’s enough of that. Have a drink.

Drinks are poured and sipped.

John (stands up): Forgive me. Sorry. But it is how I have come to see things.

Rachel: But you have always enjoyed your food. Bit of a whizz cook as well. And you love good company - certainly our company, of course. It IS called civilisation.

John: You may be right. I am no longer sure of much these days. I just ponder.

Fade to black. Then Up again to John and Mary, clearing the table.

Mary: That was a jolly evening. Apart from your ranting on about shitting. I suppose it did liven things up a bit. They do seem very happy together, don't they? There's a sort of unspoken affection apparent in all the little looks and body language.

John: Yes - they are very fortunate.

Mary: That thing you talked about. The civilisation is just a cover up. Did you mean it for everything? I mean – what about 'love'. Is that a cover up?

John: O yes. People need to fuck each other. I think men seem to want that all the time. Then they can't just do it or admit to it. Or some can I suppose. They invent this thing called 'lurve'. It solidifies the sex into something meaningful - whereas apart from procreation it actually has no meaning at all.

Mary: Do you mean that? Really? Is that what we are - us two. Wrapped up in broad theatrical conspiracy so we can fuck. Not that we do much of that anymore.

Pause

Do you love me?

To Black

A strong white spot light from above comes on with a noise shining down on John who is standing centre stage. He stands still.

Another lesser spot shines down on a man who has entered stage left. The man is exactly the same as John.

Double: Hey - You! I need to speak to you.

John starts to walk off.

Double: No you don't. Stay where you are. I need to ask you some questions. No - stop still.

John turns and stays still, looking across the stage at the Man.

John: Well, if I can be of any help . . .

Man comes halfway across the stage towards John.

Double: Now then - first things first. Who are you?

John: I don't know.

Double: You must know. Do you have any documents on you? Do you have any identity?

John: No – I don't know anything about that. What identity? I don't remember having any identity.

Double: Can't remember who you are? Memory getting a bit wayward? Let's try another tack then. Simpler. Where were you this morning, around 8 o'clock?

John: I was in bed. No! I was half in bed. I remember waking and immediately start to get out of bed. So I was sitting on the side of the bed. From here I looked out of the window. It looks out onto a small walled garden. Very nice. Got a table and chairs and a bench at one end. It looked as it normally does. Is it Spring? I think it must be because there were small yellow flowers dotted around. And small green shoots on the twigs and branches. And a few of those little birds flying back and forth. I put bird feeders out for them you know.

(This next is in a sort of quietly ecstatic manner) But then suddenly I had a feeling that I didn't know what I was looking at. I couldn't name anything. So everything, whatever it was, sort of dazzled with a kind of mystery. All joined up. I was full of fear. But a fearful wonder. Then I closed my eyes for a moment. I opened them and the garden was different. It was full of flowers - roses - you know - those old bourbon roses that smell so lovely. I tried to think of the names but failed. French of course. But it was full summer. I blinked again and - and the leaves were golden against a deep blue sky. Again I blinked and the snow - you should have seen the snow. Again and again I closed and opened my eyes and the years and seasons were speeding past, faster and faster until a sort of blur of everything. And I became lost. I looked at my hands and they were covered in parchment skin. I must have been aging.

It's time you see. Where did all those seasons go? Where are they? Didn't someone ask where are the snows of yesteryear. But there was no yesteryear. No tomorrow. All at once. Like that.

I stopped looking for a moment, closed my eyes and took deep breaths. When I looked again all was still and it was spring again but I had no idea where I was. Place or time. No time. No place. It was all the same.

Do you know?

But, by the way - who are you?

Double: Never mind about me. You are not making any sense. I'll need to investigate this further. Please stay available. I'll need to speak to you again and try to get something coherent out of you.

John: If you say so. I'd be happy to answer any . . . I do hope it's not serious. Am I in any trouble . . .?

To black.

Scene: Doctor's surgery. John and Mary are sitting opposite Dr. David Sanderson

John: I'm so sorry David, but this may be a waste of your time. But I have discussed this with Mary and I agreed to talk it through with you - and with Mary here to throw in her observations.

David: So – where do you want to begin?

John: It's nothing physical. I feel perfectly fine for the present. It is something I am finding hard to explain to anyone. It is that some kind of veil has been lifted on my perceptions and I see things - differently - from how I used to and how I can see that everyone else sees them.

David: What 'things' do you mean.

John: I mean everything, the whole caboodle.

David: How does this manifest itself? How does it affect you?

John: Well - I am in what I can only say is a halfway house. I get on in life and get about and socialise but on the other hand I feel I am playing a role amongst people. And they don't know how I am seeing them and I can't tell them.

Mary: He goes about our daily routine seemingly quite happily but sometimes drifts off - sometime in the middle of an exchange or conversation. Sometimes he just stands still and, what he calls, 'ponders'. When I ask what's wrong he seems to come out of a dream and says 'nothing - nothing at all' or words to that effect.

David: How's your memory John? Noticed any blanks, gaps in your memory?

John: No - not at all. But I now have to remember two versions of everything. My real perceptions and the ones I presume I am expected to conform to. Something like that. It gets very confusing.

David: I'm sure it does. What about balance? OK on your pins?

John: Yes.

David: (*making notes all the while*) Ever find yourself wondering where you are?

John: Well - yes - sometimes. I was in the park the other day and I wasn't sure what the park was. Or rather it wasn't how I expected it to be.

David: I see – or rather I am not sure I see at all. Not sure. What about your behaviour in the home? Perhaps Mary could answer that.

Mary: Recently - yes - he has sometimes blurted out things which seem quite rude at times - or blunt - and he is sometimes indifferent to how the people around him take what he is saying. But then he apologises and is quite normal - if that's the word I want.

John: And I sometimes feel that someone is stalking me.

Mary: You have never told me that! Stalking you! (*She looks at David in alarm*)

John: Yes. I don't see anyone but I feel that there is a presence and whoever it is, is asking me questions I can't answer. It is most frustrating.

David: OK. *Pause*. Let's leave that one hanging for a the moment. You are now retired after teaching art for your whole career – how long was that?

John: Around 40 years.

David: So how are you find your release? Is it a chance to get on with your own work? How is it working out?

John: I did start painting in earnest when I first left school. I was getting down to it. Fascinated and excited that I was catching up with lost time. But gradually I lost interest I couldn't see the point. Then I couldn't see the paint! Sorry about that. I can't tell you why. I am not bored. I don't think I am bored because I am so fascinated by what is happening to me.

David: When did all this start? After your retirement?

John: I has sort of crept up on me, slowly. I think I first noticed things were not as they seemed about 18months ago.

Pause as David looks at notes. Looks up at John.

David: In some respects you are showing signs of early on-set dementia. Also it may be a phase of dissociation which might have several causes. But on the other hand you don't conform to any of the classic set of symptoms. It's a bit of a mix. You are obviously undergoing some kind of mental transition but I have never come across anything such as you are describing.

I can only suggest a few things to begin with. You seem rather isolated. Why not join some group, club or something where you can meet other people doing a activity you really enjoy. Book club? Archery!! (That came off the top of my head!). Music club. Do you play an instrument? A choir? Something like that. And do whatever it is with Mary.

Lastly, why don't you try writing a memoir, about your life and how things were before these - er - changes? It will stimulate your memory and keep you in touch with your past. Something like that.

I think we should monitor what's going on so I shall make an appointment for you for 3 months' time. Of course if things change get back to me earlier.

Mary: But what about the 'stalking'? It sounds more serious than the other stuff.

David: Well yes. That might indicate something else but it is early days. Certainly if that side of it gets worse, then do get back to me.

Mary and John act as leaving the room. It goes to black behind them so they are standing stage front.

Mary: Well - what did you make of all that?

John: It felt like he was seeing me on my first steps to one of those large sitting rooms surrounded by sleeping octogenarians in cleanable armchairs, a telly bearing away and someone offering me a nice cup of tea.

Mary: Nonsense. His advice seemed quite sensible to me - apart from us sharing activities. I don't think that would go very well. He seemed interested and took you at your word.

John: My word? I can't put whatever it is I am thinking or feeling into words. I feel as though I have left my moorings and am beginning to drift out to sea.

Mary: Hang on in there and try to get back to shore. We are all waiting for you.

A pause

Mary: Being stalked? Were you serious?

John: O yes. I know I am. But I believe it's me who is doing the stalking.

To black.

Light up on the same sitting room. Evening. Lights on. Graham and John are sitting on the armchairs with drinks.

Graham: I could get used to this you know.

John: What?

Graham: Sitting quietly like this. No Rachel. No Menace. I'd probably get bored after a while but for the moment this is bliss.

John: Not long now then you will have another menace. Looking forward to it?

Graham: Yes and no. At the moment no. Been through it. Drains one. But you know about it, you *did* it. Rachel. What is your memory of that?

John: Can hardly remember anything. A few things. But I believe I conformed to all the expected emotions. The first look into the eyes of this small creature and being aware that it was looking back at me. The contact. The astonishing connection, even then. I wonder now if they were real emotions or was I playing a part, the part expected, laid out for me. I don't think she was. She had no choice. Perhaps I didn't. In that room I conformed to and was safe in the norm of fatherhood. Hovering around in the ward room, everyone going about and being efficient and jolly. And me - isolated and playing my part. As if I was deeply involved but distant at the same time.

Graham: Really? I mean really! You think the connection and all that were a put on, at least in part? Can you really think that? You love Rachel. I have seen it. She knows it. You know it. What else is there? I know the difficulties but the Menace is the be all and end all for me. And Rachel of course.

John: Yes. All these emotions are in place. But I can't avoid the feeling that there is a split somewhere between all that and my feeling – if that is the word – the feeling that I am living a dual existence. One engaged and full of love and life. The other - a blank. (*exasperated with himself*) Not it's not that at all. O dear. It's as if I can see

and engage in the close up stuff – emotional connections, excitement in art and music and all that but simultaneously looking from way back, way above - almost from another planet and can see the whole thing. I'm doing my best here.

Graham: I don't really get it, John. I don't think you do either. You seem to be led down a path that is splitting you off from the world and darkening the further you go along it. Be careful.

John: You may be right but it has a fascination, don't you think? I can't think of any writer or artist who has looked at things this way. I keep looking.

Light goes down on all but one spot above John. He appears to be drifting off. Talking to himself. Starts off humorous and develops into a manic outpouring.

John: So we have a birth coming. New life. My daughter Rachel will go through several hours of physical torture and at the end of it produce a small person whom she believes will give meaning to her life. If not to the small person. And she's right. But what meaning? Having children has always had a queasy feel about it for me - welcoming a stranger to share your life for decades without interviewing them first. But welcoming them to - this? This world where everyone is pretending everything is all OK and smiling and saying that even if it's not OK we can fix it? Devote one's life to fixing.

A life devoted to trying fix the unfixable.

Pause

I know exactly what I will say when I am confronted with the new arrival.

'Oh how wonderful! Well done daughter! Another miracle! I can't believe it! He doesn't look like you or Graham or me or Mum. Well that's good news! Let me give you both a hug. I'll try not to crush the little one'.

Something like that. And my silent consciousness will be saying. O dear, o dear - why? Why bring this innocent, unknowing creature into this appalling set up? The horror of existence even Darwin recognised. We continue en-masse to deny it but you only have to have an honest look around. Certainly not at the nature programmes who try to transform the violence and pain and suffering into something we should be full of wonder at and want to preserve, rather than be outraged and scream against. And at the extreme we have the religionists telling us it was all created by a loving and caring father of us all. O save me from that!

But I can scream! Scream at the deception, the falsity, the idiocy, the blatant cover-ups, the corruption of truth, the baseless optimism of our presumed happy interactions. Fuck it! - and I am silent. I have to be silent! Like all of you – of us.

It's not political, O no - it's way beyond that. The actual truth of our living state cannot be spoken of. It's in accepting this fucking gagging we all conspire with the whole shebang to try to make the unacceptable palatable. And we are so incredibly arrogant about how clever we are in doing so. OK - if I am being seen as half demented it will be another demonstration of how the poor human individual can shunt away the abhorred reality of their situation and not be believed. Deliberately. And I am the mad one. I am the outsider. The man with no ability to live in the their world. Scream! Scream! (*He either says these last words loudly or actually screams*)

The lights come up suddenly.

Mary and Rachel are standing next to the armchair. Rachel is carrying the baby.

Mary: What on earth is this! What's the matter?

John: I'm sorry. Sorry. I was asleep. Dreaming. Bit of a nightmare. Sorry.

Rachel: You OK now Pops? I've brought the baby.

Graham rushes in.

Graham: What all the noise?

Rachel: It was Dad. Woke from a bit of a scary dream. Baby's still asleep!

Mary is stroking John's back and calming him.

John: So sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. And you have the baby. No name yet?

Rachel: Not yet.

She shows John the baby. He takes it onto his lap and looks at it for a few seconds.

John: Oh how wonderful! Well done daughter! Another miracle! I can't believe it! He doesn't look like you or Graham or Mum or me. Well that's good news! Let me give you both a hug. I'll try not to crush the little one.

To black.

Lights up on Doctor's surgery. David sitting opposite Mary.

Mary: Thank you for seeing me again David. You know the background to all this. It has not got any better. John is often somewhere else in his mind these days. He is troubled about something important. I can see that but the bugger won't open up.

David: Does John know you are here?

Mary: Not this time. I wanted to be more open with you about his – what? - condition.

David: What has developed?

Mary: Well - one thing is that I now catch him talking to himself. Or rather I find him talking to someone else. Someone who is not there.

David: Have you asked him about this?

Mary: I did the first time. He looked at me as if was interrupting something important. Slightly annoyed. Then he saw who it was and smiled and said that he has got into this silly habit of chatting away to himself. Passes the time he said. I'm sure this is to do with him feeling he is being followed or stalked. He mentions that from time to time.

I am now deeply worried about him. We have always got on very well in a knock-about sort of way. We made each other laugh. But now - this distance. Separation. I am beginning to get truly pissed off with it. I am beginning to feel lonely.

David: He is still an enigma to me. If I didn't know him as well as I do I would certainly get on with tests for Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. But nothing fits together at the moment. We could do some very basic tests - you know - his general health. Do some blood tests to see if anything is going on there. Perhaps even make an appointment with a psychotherapist. Do you think he would agree to that?

Mary: I think so - he is very compliant to anything I say at the moment. Wasn't like that before. I suppose it's at least something to be actually doing rather than just watching him change like this. I'll give it a go.

But the reality is neither of us knows what is going on do we?

David: OK let's leave it at that for now. Bye the way Mary – how's the drinking?

Mary: Under control David. Under control.

To black with top spot on Mary. She turns her rotating chair to face the audience.

I never thought I would be in a situation like this. It's so unexpected. We've been together for 40 years. Both had good stable jobs in teaching – him art – me English. Holidays. Almost the same tastes in food, music. All the sensual stuff.

Then Rachel. It was all fulfilling in a rather understated way. Now I look at him and I am finding myself agreeing with what he is saying in part. Maybe he is right. That everything looks different at our age. But with him it seems more than that. More profound. It's becoming disruptive. He doesn't seem to fit into our normal life anymore. Like some kind of alien thing has entered into him. Taken over.

But maybe - just maybe - he is not becoming fogged but seeing clearly. Clearer than all of us. I can imagine that if you took away all social mores and looked blankly at the world it might look very different from our everyday acceptance of our condition. Maybe. I imagine it could be quite terrifying.

But I am not going to let the bastard drift away like this. Not without a fight. I love him very much. But now I am not sure what those words mean. What love means.

Low light comes up stage left. John wanders in slowly he is followed closely by his double. They are in deep conversation. Mary stands up and backs away for a moment.

Mary: What's all this then? Who are you talking to this time.

John: O - Mary - I didn't see . . . You can't see . . .no-one. My usual nattering. Sorry about that. I'll try to stop it. It must get on your nerves.

His double slowly walks into the shadows at the back of the stage. While Mary says:

Mary: Not get on my bloody nerves. It's getting bloody frightening. Listen! You must go back the doctor and take some tests. See a psychiatrist. That's the start. Gotta be done fella! I won't take no. Do it!

John: (quietly): Just as you say. I'll go along with it - for now. *More firmly* - I'll make an appointment.

Mary stomps off. Dark comes down around John.

Turns to audience.

What can I say? OK - I'll take the tests? No real point. I've done them already. Off the internet. Pass. Nothing wrong. I fucking well know there is nothing wrong! It's not me, it's everything else! It's as if when all around seem to be closing in on themselves, becoming 'involved', I am moving back and away - seeing things from a distance. Like rising up in a rocket from earth and seeing it whole. Not just the landscape and the fucking tectonic plate stuff but the human movements, the emotional engagements, the wave motions of human interactions. And all the minutiae of daily life becoming a pattern – a series of pre-set evolved reactions over which no individual has any control. But they think they have. And they argue the toss about their opinions, their rightness. Their solid convictions. I can't hear

them anymore. Just a buzz coming out of these strange, strange creatures. O and I join them. I have to come down to earth and let my responses bounce off their interjections - back and forth they go.

But what can I do? What can I do? What can we do? I don't know because I feel there is still more to see behind all this. More of it - or perhaps not more. Perhaps nothing.

His double walks slowly into a vague light.

Double: So - you sense something else? Another layer?

John: I do. Like looking into a vast distance and sensing something beyond my sight. In a mist. A cloud. A vague substance. Or an idea just out of sight. And I am afraid to see what it is.

Double: You know you have no choice but to carry on crossing this desert towards that - thing. Just do it. Ignore everyone, everything else. You know you have no choice. Do it.

Double fades away

John: I was somewhere. Not sure where. Not sure at all. A valley. Or a narrow gorge with cliffs on either side. There was no escape. The sun was shining but I was in the shade of the gorge. All the cliffs had caves in them at the bottom and in rows along the upper reaches. The cliffs sometimes grew large. So tall. I couldn't see the tops. Way above me so I had to tip my head back. But the others were not high. And then creatures emerged one after the other from the lower caves and walked up and down. Many of them. I was astonished. They were all so busy and making noises. I couldn't interpret the noises. Some would go back inside the caves. Then I saw others at the upper caves looking out, leaning out. Waving. I felt oppressed and embarrassed. Being seen like that. And the noise. A rushing sound all the time. My nerves were jangling. I had lost all sense of scale.

At last a great mechanical thing came down the gorge, roaring and chugging and belching. Came out of a mist at the end of the gorge. It headed straight for me. Creatures were inside it and on top. All waving. It terrified me. I ran to the side of the gorge. I ran and I fell into a cave.

To black.

Lights up to the sitting room. Mary is sitting reading again. There is a noise of a door opening and slamming. She looks up as John almost falls through the door.

Mary: Crickey – you're in a hurry! You being chased by your stalker?

John (*he gathers himself and strolls over to the drinks table*): No joke. Sorry I thought I was late for something. Odd that. Daft. (*pause, he moves across the room*) I know it's early but I think I'll have a drink. Join me?

Mary: Why not. Usual. (*She gets up and stretches*). So what happened with the quack?

(*John is pouring drinks*)

John: I was a good boy. I did the test. Not much to it. Got it all right. Then he drifted off a bit and among other things he actually asked me if I knew who the current Prime Minister was.

Mary: And?

John: I said, 'Don't start me on that one or we'll be here all afternoon.'

Mary: O well done! Clean bill of health then?

John: I would have thought so but he won't let it go. He is becoming obsessed I think. Thinks he's found an entirely new state of mind unknown to modern medicine. He may be right. He may be right. He has made an appointment for me with a trick cyclist. Could be a laugh.

Mary: Has he suggested some drugs? Ant-depressants for someone who isn't depressed?

John: Not yet - but I suspect it will come. I will refuse of course.

Mary: Not like you. Always up for an adventure. A new experience. Why not preempt him and ask for some?

John: I keep saying I am not ill. My mind is clear. But not in a normal social way. I can't help that.

Mary: Mind you - if I could get hold of some psychedelics I might have a go. Could be very revealing.

John: But I've been thinking over what is happening. I think a large part of it is that I have stopped naming things. Or something has stopped me naming things. Not immediately anyway. There's a gap. I see the thing and have to fight to get the name. But in that interval I seem to glimpse a new world. All inclusive. A vision of everything. Unspeakable. It's as if the language has had a brake on it. No words. Just sensation. But that is not all. There is something else. I know - I have my

visions – no – sightings – gardens, streets more real than in this current pantomime. O damn! I can't get it! Something after that.

Mary: Keep going at it. Don't forget you have an involved audience to all this. It started as mildly worrying - mildly amusing to tell the truth. But now . . . but now it is becoming - oh dear - what can I say - it's becoming tedious and scary. You are not here among us most of the time. And it feels as though you are not believing we are here opposite you - face to face. Only your face is not engaged. Not the lively reactive face I used to know. Just a mask. John - it's become serious.

And your 'visions'? 'Sightings'? What on earth . . .?

How do you feel about it? Surely you must FEEL something. Are you happy?

John: I . . . I . . . have nothing to say.

To black.

Light up on a psychiatrist's office. John in armchair opposite Dr. Geraldine Jones.

The doctor is looking over the notes from John's GP.

Dr (mumbling): Signs of . . . signs of . . . no conclusive . . . not Alzheimer's . . . see things in a . . . feelings of. . .

(She looks up).

Well John. This is a bit of a puzzle isn't it?

John: I agree. And you will solve it. Isn't that what psychiatrists do. I once heard a friend who said a psychiatrist she knew conducted his interviews with a large adjustable spanner on his desk. When asked why he answered that it was because he was always loosening peoples nuts.

Dr: Very amusing. I can't say I can fix anything entirely but we can try to ease the problem. We are looking at the possibility of dissociation. Where people sometimes lose their hold on their identity or their place in the world. Even feel they do not exist. It can have its origins way back. Did your GP has ask about any previous trauma the nature of which might have caused you to keep it hidden? Something you might have kept under wraps which might be gradually emerging? Some event in your past which caused you a great shock?

John: He did mention something like that but didn't pursue it. I had a think afterwards and the only truly traumatic thing I could think of was when Poland beat England in the 1974 world cup qualifier. O - and much later it, and almost as

shocking, was when Tracy Emin was made professor of drawing at the Royal Academy school. Apart from that I have lived a blessedly calm life.

Dr: It's good that you can laugh about it but dissociation can lead to serious consequences – isolation. Loneliness. Depression. Certainly a loss of identity. And a breaking away from familiar emotional attachments. Does any of that sound familiar?

John: Well I suppose it does but not in negative way. I do feel rather disconnected from my life. I seem to be acting a part in some drama and watching not only it but my part in it. As if I was an audience to my own performance. A stepping back. My life as a play probably wouldn't merit a long run in the West End. It would need more violence in it. As it stands the most exciting and bloody event was me walking into out bathroom door a couple of years ago and making my nose bleed. You see – not much of a story line.

Dr: I am hearing a rather cynical man, covering up his doubts and worries with humour.

John: That's about right. But what is wrong with that?

Dr: I feel I am going need some time with you John. Do a little delving. See what we come up with.

John: I think not Doctor. It is not my problem as I see it. It is the problem of those around me. Not just them. A problem for society. As I see it and as they are perhaps beginning to see it. They don't like it. But it is the truth.

To black

Spot lights up from above on John and double sitting in chairs facing one another.

John: You again.

Double: What did you expect? I'll keep coming until you tell the truth.

John: I'm not sure I know what the truth is. I mean I think I see something emerging from my perceptions but I am afraid of it. I think it may produce a breakdown on all sorts of levels.

Double: This won't do. I won't accept that. Not good enough. You know you have no choice but to push on. Push it to the limit and know it. Own it. You are becoming transfixed by what you know but cannot say. You are becoming dead to the world. Atrophied between what you have been, what you have now intuitively sniffed out about the world. There is now an appalling chasm between you and

your sanctioned place in this whole orchestrated concerto. You are the soloist who has suddenly refused to play with the others. And you stand there with your violin drooping at your side and are silent. No - it can't go on.

John: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let me try. (*pause*) I have become aware of my animal nature. I am an evolved primate. I have all the body functions of a chimpanzee or bonobo. Arms, legs, eyes, digestive and reproductive systems. I know I have a brain which functions differently from other primates but basically is backed by the same forces which drive all forms of life. I know I have limited perceptions of the material world. Most of what I know about the world I have been told, not experienced. I know nothing at all about existence itself. Nor does anybody else. But this is sufficient to get me by. I know my main - no - only real function is to breed. But knowing these facts just propels me to see how futile it all is. All this striving and fighting and struggle for - what? - 'meaning' - 'identity'. Some such fictional chimeras. And people thinking they can buy such things. Grasping at 'airy nothings' I think I heard it said.

And all waking time spent seeking oblivion. All the music, the plays, the football matches, the holidays, hobbies, the sex and the sensual pursuits, all sought-after ecstatic experiences all, all desperate efforts to achieve oblivion from the nightmare of just looking around. Even those who tell us they achieve a loss of ego, a blending with the whole universe from top to bottom. Another illusion of meaning and another cover up, an escape from the truth. We come from oblivion, seek oblivion and eventually have oblivion forced on us. And all of us saying that is not what we want.

Double: Go on. I think we are now on the right track.

John: So I look at my wife and my daughter. My daughter who has just bred for the second time. And what can I say? How on earth do I tell them all that? I just sit and am dumb. Can say nothing without compromising myself - and them, by letting them be part of this ongoing farce without me saying what I think. No - not think. Know!

There is more. Go back from this local view. See the creatures of the earth and the plants of the earth. All the swarming masses of living stuff, on and under the earth. All involved in this great striving. From where we are - now way above the earth - we can see the living crust like some great creeping fungus wrapping around the globe. And see the cities as in opposition - cancerous scabs on the face of the earth.

And all this emotional response is a human construct. A mask for the utterly unknown power behind it, the blind indifferent energy of creation.

Captain Ahab knew it all. 'Look ye, Starbuck,' he said, 'all visible objects are but as pasteboard masks. Some inscrutable yet reasoning thing puts forth the moulding of their features.' And he hated it with all his strength. He goes on, 'The white whale is but a mask. 'Tis the thing behind the mask I chiefly hate; the malignant thing that has plagued mankind since time began'. I don't hate it but I could understand how that might be a reasoned response. No, I just look and am silent in front of this, to my human sensibilities, this overwhelming catastrophe. This farce.

Tell that to someone who had just given birth? What? No.

Double: Stop there. Let me turn things around a bit. Let me take a different angle. You are leaving out the other side of this - farce. What about the joy, the pleasure, the love, the sensed beauty, the chanced transcendence and wonderment of it all. The ecstatic feeling of oneness with the whole of creation which is available to you. The marvel of it. Aren't these the best ever compensations for you failing to reveal what you see as the truth? Isn't that a better 'truth'?

John: If it is so then I must spend my life lying to everyone. Maybe that's what I have to do. But there is something beyond even that. Something I can't quite face. Too much.

I think I have to disappear. Go away. So I don't have to face them. It.

Double: Wait. You said earlier that when you saw the bird you couldn't put a name to it. And not putting a name to it - you saw it. And in seeing it, it filled you full of wonder. Isn't that sense of wonder enough?

John: Maybe it is. Perhaps if Ahab had not named Moby Dick he might have seen the whale as a whale and it might have filled him with wonder. Not vengeance. But it is not possible to unknow things. Like - I'll tell you what it's like. It's like all these people trying to save the planet. Helping to save endangered species. Breeding rare species. Protecting this and that moth or whale or whatever. I tell you that it is still all ego. The last fucking elephant on earth won't know it's the last fucking elephant, nor will it give a toss if it did. We want them for ourselves. For our pleasure. To pump up our sense of wonder. Or saving us from appalling guilt at how we let it go. Saving the sodding planet means saving it for us. For our survival. For our pleasure. The planet, like the elephant, doesn't give a fuck. It will go on until it gets burnt up or whatever the prediction is.

Double: And beliefs? What about your politics? Always on the mild side but you do vote and you do, sometimes, take action. What now? Let things go? No point? Abandon all your fine and noble feelings about what is right and wrong? Now why don't you hang on to the wonder and make that the base of your connection with

the world? Protect and amplify the wonder. It makes sense. Give you meaning, a purpose.

John: No - No! It doesn't work like that. And I don't want a meaning or purpose. I know there is neither and I don't care. I have heard Mary say that if she thought like me she's throw herself under a bus. Well - that may be a true and reasonable response. Because I can see behind the wonder. Or rather what the wonder is. If I experience wonder what does that do? Is it another way of achieving transcendence. Or in other words - oblivion? Retreating into the illusion of total connection with the cosmos? The wonder is just my emotions. That's all - my evolved, incommunicable emotions, stirred up by my evolved and incommunicable perceptions. The rest – that out there – is totally unmoved by my reactions to it. And an equally valid reaction to the wonders we are pointed to is, 'so what?' or a retreat from the vastness of space and the roaring of lions in utter terror.

No - I am stymied. I don't know what to do. Yet.

To black

Scene: Sitting room. John is sitting silent in the armchair. Mary pacing about. She looks at him for some time. He stares back.

John: What?

Mary: You know what, you bastard! You know what's happening to our family and you do nothing. Don't give me that crap about 'seeing differently'. I can see and I can see you going down the pan and dragging us all with you. Are you so selfish? To do nothing about it? So wrapped up in yourself you can't just bloody well snap out of it? Why not do something 'noble'? Forget your own bloody ego and think of all of us. You can't exist without us – and, sad though it is to say it, we can't exist without you. At least not if you are just going to sit there in our lives driving us all witless. It's so fucking selfish! We are a unit. Unit. Unified.

John: You want me to go.

Mary: No - you idiot! I want you to come back. You've already gone.

To black.

Light up on Mary centre stage in spotlight. She's been drinking. Maybe holding a glass.

Mary: In our garden. Autumn. Gold leaves against a blue sky. The birds are still here. Flitting about. Some birds maybe that he couldn't name at the beginning of all this. I, of course, can name them all, and the plants and the clouds. Name them

all. Nail them down with a label so I can't see them. He let them go. And now seems to have joined them.

I am alone now. He has drifted so far away. The thin thread attaching him to me has slowly frayed and is now broken at last and he is drifting out of sight. But what do I see now. I sense the darkness he sees but I don't experience it. I see it. It makes sense. It is an image of the truth. A truth. I feel as if I am now in a floating state. Truth should have meaning and solidity and a goal to reach for. To establish something solid to stand on. Now - I can't see it. Or I can see other ways. Is that possible? Some that may be more acceptable to me and my life. I can play with it all. And I don't care. I want to survive. No - that's not enough. I want to live. Everything I always loved and lived for is still there. He, he can't let go of his fucking truth. He is tied to this idea that one can't avoid the truth once discovered. Can't unlearn things. But you can ignore them. You can grasp an idea, maybe fictitious, maybe fucking nuts, like a benevolent God. But it can work. Is it his lack of imagination or daring? An inability to see ways of living that do not need that particular truth. A way out. But whatever, his way of seeing will always be with me now. Just out of sight. The stark horror of nothingness stalking, not him, no not now, me.

Scene: Sitting room. John in the armchair. Mary, Rachel and Graham standing. Agitated. They are loud.

Mary: That's it John. I've had this up to here! You refuse to try the tablets. You will not do the meditation as has been suggested a thousand times. You just sit there. Saying nothing. Nothing. At least you used to talk a few words and try to eke out a grin. But not nothing. Speak for fuck's sake!

Rachel: Come on Dad. Mum's right. It can't go on. It's so selfish. Think of us - me and Graham and the kids. They have lost their Grandfather for crying out loud. What about us? We are waiting for you. We love you.

Pause. The family move around, turn their backs and look out of the window. Etc.

John (stirs): I can only repeat words from a script. Show forced and made up emotions like an actor in a play. I am in a play.

Mary *turns around with some violence*: You are NOT in a play. This is the reality. We are the reality. This is all you've got. So wake up and bloody well join us.

Longer pause.

John: All right then. I shall write it all down. I shall do that. I need to get away. I'll go. But you are all in too close! Step back and look if you dare.

They all turn to look at him with various reactions.

To black.

Dim light up on a bed scene at night. Not sure how this can be done. John is sitting up. Mary asleep beside him. Barely visible.

John: Now the dark. How the dark surrounds me. Deep in the dark I can see. And the darkness shows me my way. Not to the light - O no. Into the deeper dark. Death? No. That's not it.

Pause

I heard it on the radio. They were talking about Beethoven and someone said 'yes, that was two years before he died in 1827'. And my mind screamed at me - He died!. He died!' Why is it so casually said, in a throw-away line, and not spark utter shock and outrage. Not because it was Beethoven. No. It's the same with all of the dead. They died. They were foetuses. Dragged or shoved out into - this. Grow, form, do stuff, and then die. Disappear. Gone. And what is shocking, what is really shocking, is that it is all seen as normal. What! For fucks sake. It cannot be 'normal'. How can we endure it? Is this dark an image of this normal. This deepest night? No, of course not. But it is a shadow of the oblivion all look for in life. How can I tell the darkness? How show the darkness? And the nothing within and beyond the darkness? And the nothing is what is behind it.

The low light fades slowly

Light up on Mary and Rachel with pram walking on stage left.

Mary: Christmas is coming. Are you playing the Father Christmas thing for the menace? Are you going to tell him the truth or just let the appalling reality dawn on the poor bugger?

Rachel: I can't bare it. I know it sounds ridiculous but taking away his lovely Christmas dreams seems so crude and cruel. I am not sure what to do. I think just let it drift. He will probably grasp it when it doesn't matter anymore.

Pause

Is that what you think dad is doing? Taking away our lovely dreams?

Mary *Immediately*: YES! By Christ that's exactly what he is doing! He cannot see that what he is saying is so fucking destructive. Yes. Destructive. Deadly. Not just to him and me but to you and the children. And not just that. He is planting a seed in the world that will bring to ruin all we hang on to - to keep us sane. Alive. Full of love and wonder. All going. Into what – nothing. The 'barren universe' he says it is. It cannot be allowed.

Rachel: You are becoming as mad as he is. Mum – do calm it. This is becoming crazy. I don't want two crazy parents. One's enough. Just let him get on with it, It's doing no good to go on about it to him. Stop it!

Mary: You've no idea. You just sit there in your ignorance and refuse to see what's in front of you, He is channelling despair. Not just for himself but for everyone. Everywhere. He has become the voice of the devil . .

R: O come on – that's...

M: True!. What he feels is a drive to destroy all creation...

R: No!

M: Our lives, our meaning, The whole of everything that makes sense – to deny wonder, to deny love, to deny me and you and corrupt the children. Rachel, he has become evil. A virus among us. I won't allow it. I won't. I am in despair about it. I don't know - I don't know what to do – or I do know – or I can't do it. He wants oblivion - very well . . .

R: Now I am shit scared of both of you. Please make it stop.

M: I will. I will I don't know how.

Rachel: Mum – stop it! Stop it. You are letting it get to you. He will come round. He will. You are going too far.

Mary: He has to stop. Be stopped. I am now so fucking angry and afraid and full of extreme frustration. Can't go on. Can't go on. He is the virus. He needs . . he needs . . . damn fucking hell. What can I do!? I need to save you . . . Through his eyes I begin to hate life. And now because of that I have become to hate him. Really hate him.

To black.

Pause for time passing.

Spot up on Rachel and Graham in conversation.

Rachel: I had a conversation with Mum yesterday which frightened the shit out of me. I think she is going off the rails. I mean seriously. She talked of dad being evil. Doing the devil's work.

Graham: You serious?

Rachel: Yes I really am. I don't think she means the devil, not the real devil, just an image really. Like she says he wants to do wicked things. She says he has these ideas about the way we behave and that he means to - I don't know - somehow tell everyone they are all playing in a huge game of charades and undermine all the meaning in their lives. Or some bloody nonsense.

Graham: Who's he going to do wicked to? The Tories? HMRC? Arsenal fans?

Rachel: Stop it! She was utterly serious. *I am serious.*

Graham: So how is he going to achieve this mighty blow to humanity? Walk about with a placard saying "The End is Nigh"? O come on Rach, it can't be that serious. He is still walking about like a real human being. And I haven't seen a pointed tail sticking out of his arse - yet.

Rachel: Well - I think it's not him we should worry about. He may be going over the top with this but it's Mum who is sounding seriously deranged. She might do something - weird. I reckon they are on the verge of a real split.

Graham: And what do you propose we do about it. Exorcism?

Rachel: No! Stop it for fucks sake. This is too much. You are not taking me seriously and it is bloody serious. You haven't heard her. I think we should ask her to see a doctor. Or someone. I'm sure she has some friends we could talk to. But she hasn't been seeing anyone lately. O - I just don't know. Why don't you ask her about it - she trusts you. And don't take the piss.

Graham. All right. All right. Let me think about it. I need to get up to speed with what's been being said. Somehow. I still sounds like a lot of narcissistic rubbish to me. A spat.

A pause. They look at each other.

Rachel: What do *you* think?

Graham: What do you mean, what do I think?

Rachel: What do you think about what Dad has been saying? About - what is it - our civilisation covering up our animal nature? And the rest. What do you think about things being meaningless? Us trying to make it alright. The void. And no jokes.

Graham: I don't know what I think. I haven't thought. I just get on with things. It all seems normal to me. Us, the kids. The house, my job. Your job. And the

seasons and summer and Christmas. And all the rest. It has a sort of flow. Which I like. Can he really think he can dismantle all that? Just by a thought? If I tried speak to your mum I wouldn't know what to say. What a mess. How have I got into this crap! Why can't they just relax. Turn a blind eye. Life is good. Life is good. Isn't it? Well our life is good. Isn't it?

Rachel: Yes - I'm sure it is. We are very lucky. No wars. No famine. And some freedom. With some money. Only. I don't know. I have to stop myself thinking about it. That's what I have to do. Just carry on with what we have and as you say go with the flow. But will you talk to mum?

Graham: No - I won't. To tell the truth I don't care. I'll not get involved in this cod philosophy junk of your father's or your mother's paranoia. Let them be nuts. I don't want to know. We have our stuff to get on with. It will resolve itself one way or another. OK? ... OK?

Rach stares at him in fear.

To black.

Light up on psychiatrists office.

Dr: Come in John (*they shake hands*). Thank you so much for coming. I know you said that any further sessions would not be useful to you but I have asked you to come in again as it may well be useful to me.

John: I am full of curiosity.

Dr: I should of course start by asking how you are, but in truth I am trying to work out how I am.

But - anyway - coffee? Tea?

They sit down.

John; No to coffee and tea. Thanks.

Dr: I have been thinking of all you have said about your, let's say, 'intuitions' about your life. I mean everyone's life. Somewhat reluctantly – very reluctantly - I have come to the conclusion that in the most fundamental aspects of what you said, you are - in the main - correct. I cannot see how I can disagree with any of it. I also agree with the denial we partake in when addressing things like 'meaning', 'identity' and such like. I have realised that I - a psychiatrist - have been in this very state of denial about all this for as long as I can remember. But I am still in a state of uncertainty. As if I know the truth but can't accept it.

John: I know the feeling. I am still bouncing off it all in various directions.

Dr: But do YOU think you are absolutely right? You sound, if I may so, rather 'preachy' about all this. As if you think you are some kind of prophet. Are you so confident? Can anyone be so sure of everything - the state of the universe.? Our place in it? Do you - just you - you only have the truth?

John: No. Of course not. I am sure there are plenty of people thinking or even just sensing the same thing. Only to say it out loud is not permissible in our society. There is a danger of melting all the social glue that binds us. I think that the truth is that I don't know the truth of anything, and neither does anyone else. That's the point. And I certainly know that.

Dr: Does this not lead you into despair? Knowing that in the end you have no meaning or worth in your life? What does that lead you to?

John: I don't know – yet. I am hovering on what I have felt is a raft of curiosity. I think there is more to it than I have been experiencing, feeling, thinking up to now. It may lead to nowhere or a stumbling through. A falling. Or even an end. I wait and see. But it is curiosity that keeps me going.

Dr: The other thing I have been testing for myself is that a great many of the problems my patients are suffering, experiencing, in their lives has a base in what you are identifying. Not the disruptions of the brain's chemistry. Nor anything arising from injury of even earlier trauma. All their anxiety, their feelings of being without a sense of worth, their desperate attempts to shore themselves up with whatever they can think of - and the despair and loneliness when they realise it's all pointless. Then the grabbing of anything to preoccupy themselves with to avoid facing it. That they are in the grip of something, some energy, beyond their comprehension and they can do nothing at all about it. The sense of incipient boredom which might lead to the void you are staring into - that is unacceptable. And I have been helping them to cover it all up with positive outlooks through whatever therapy seemed appropriate. But it's not true and I am part of the cover up, indulging in it myself. It is that fundamentally they are right. There is nothing there to help them. It is their inability to construct some kind of self-worth against this void they sense which underlies their existence that propels them into a darkness, a floundering about in life with no escape.

And – I feel it too. And I am no longer sure what to do – for them or for myself.

John: It's bloody obvious I am not going to be able to suggest anything by way of a solution. As many people say these days, 'it is what it is'. Why not join in the orgy of forgetting and stop worrying about it – if that is possible. But I don't know how. Here we are, bags of flesh with a self-regarding consciousness that seems to

have uncovered far too much about our situation and there's no going back. Or perhaps some whiz will invent a gadget for wiping our brains clean of consciousness itself, leaving us with pure intuition and a simple emotional attachment to the material world and it's horrors and blessings. And that without judgement. How long? How long?

Silence

Dr: I think we need to keep in touch. I have much to think about. I may even come up with some new therapy which could, if not tackle, at least bring these ideas to the fore for my patients. So, a tentative thank you. You will let me know what is happening?

John: Of course. Without a shadow of a doubt. We are in it together. All of us.

Lights go down on the office as John. moves to centre stage. Spot from above.

I did it. I wrote it all. More came out as I wrote. I took a few days off. Went down to the coast. Needed to see the sea. Paddle. . . . see the horizon. So - so - opening the vast vision of the void. That straight line. So solid it makes my head spin. But that is true. That spinning. Off angle. Pushing off the upright so that all is jumbled and ridiculous. And the birds screaming above and beyond it all. It seems true. The way things are.

I stood on the shingle for some time. Far out under a dark sky I could see columns of rain. Almost static. Drifting. An cold breeze lifted my hair. Feet wet. Bottom of trousers badly rolled up, dripping wet. I could see the grey hairs on my ankles flattened by the water and looking like tiny worms crawling down my legs. That was OK. Here, without having to, I could see and speak without being censored, by myself or others. To speak of the indifference, and the horror, and the void behind the made up engagements of life and behind the fun and the joy, the love and the sublime music of being alive. I have seen the void behind it all. It is that emptiness which always induces us to do what we are best at – fill in the gaps with guesses which suit us. I was free to say it all. And in the end all I felt was a profound compassion. Yes for me, but for all of them, and everything. Just that. There was no possibility of anything else. Just that.

I came back thinking I might tell everyone. I mean, tell everyone.

To black

Light up on Mary centre stage holding a manuscript. She is drunk. Holding glass of scotch.

Mary: He wrote it all. He showed me. I read it. Shorter than I thought it would be. But all there. What he has seen is what is in front of us all, all the time. We could

have all written it - if we for one moment would allow ourselves to do so. The unspoken theatre we all - all - live in. And it is unacceptable. He had the courage to open the gates of hell and look in. He found it empty. That was the horror. No-one should see this. Think of the children. He actually wants to publish the fucking thing. Give it as his gift to the world. And he won't stop now. He is on some fucking kind of mission. I can't happen. No. It can't. He has become a ticking bomb threatening our lives - our children - all children. All of us. Suppose we accept part of his version. Yeah - OK - we are all acting our parts. So fucking what!? The play keeps going. We know our lines. And we play them, prompts and all where necessary. Who cares - makes us function. The whole bloody set up works. It may not be TRUE. But it works. And this one man wants to say different. Well he won't. I won't let him.

Spot comes up on John standing alone centre.

John: I have come to the end of whatever it is that I – I? – have been pursuing or being pursued by. I think I can handle it. I will need to become two. For one I will need to relearn my part and play it perfectly. In the actions of the everyday. Even coaxing emotions where necessary. The tears at a concert. The laughter at some slapstick antics, some wit. And I will seek emotional and mental oblivion with all the rest. I will appreciate it all and no-one will ever know I am not a complete and single person. But perhaps there will be a time when these two perceptions might coalesce and a richer life might arise from the marriage. Outside of the theatre I will be standing alone in the street looking up at the lights and the cast list. And look, not sardonically, nor with any kind of contempt or superiority. No - only with the unlooked for compassion. It seeps through – it makes me cry. It says, 'There, there – I know. I know'. For me, for them. For everything. Everything. And then I fade.

To black

Lights up on sitting room. John is slumped in an armchair. He has drifted off. Mary stands looking at him. She is holding an empty glass. She goes to the drinks cabinet and starts to pour another large scotch. She is shaking. She stops. Thinks. Looks round at John. She takes a cushion from the other armchair and walks slowly over to John. Then with some force she starts to cover John's face with the cushion and holds it there.

Mary: *Loudly* - Go! Go! Go! - *short pause* – *then gently* – Go darling go, please go. (*sobbing*).

As she says this John wakes in alarm, sits up and grabs his arm and chest letting out a roar of pain. He makes a grab for Mary.

John (garbled): Help me!

Mary, in horror, tries to back away but John holds onto her. She drops the cushion. John, still groaning loudly, begins to slide to the floor. He keeps hold of Mary and she holds him. He eventually lies still, with her arms around him. Like a pieta. She is unsure of what has happened. She reaches for the fallen cushion and puts it under his head. Stands. Backs away.

Then goes back to check John's breath/pulse. Stands. Looks. Then goes over to the coffee table and picks up her phone. Dials.

Mary: Rachel. Mum. . . . It's Dad.

CURTAIN