

# **VOICES OF THE GREAT WAR**

BY ANNECY LAX AND THE COMPANY OF

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THIS IS CONCEIVED AS A STYLISED PIECE OF DRAMATISED VERBATIM THEATRE. THE DESCRIPTIVE TEXT CONTAINED IN THE SCRIPT SITS ALONGSIDE THE SPOKEN TEXT TO COMPLETE THE HEIGHTENED WORLD OF THE PLAY.

THE STAGE DIRECTIONS CONVEY NARRATIVE INFORMATION, BUT ALSO SUGGEST MOOD AND ATMOSPHERE - THOSE IN THE LATTER CATEGORY ARE OPEN TO REINTERPRETATION AND ALL BETTER ALTERNATIVES. THE PIECE IS INTENDED TO BE FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO ACCOMMODATE MOST STAGING CONFIGURATIONS AND STYLES.

## **CHARACTERS:**

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN PROTAGONISTS. THEIR AGES SPAN FROM 5 TO 15 TO 25 TO 90 DEPENDENT ON WHERE WE ARE IN THE STORY; SOMETIMES THEIR AGE WILL CHANGE OVER THE COURSE OF A SCENE.

THERE ARE VARIOUS OTHER CHARACTERS THAT MAKE UP THE WORLD AROUND THE PROTAGONISTS – THESE ARE PLAYED BY THE REST OF THE COMPANY. SOMETIMES THE GENDER IS SPECIFIC, BUT MUCH IS INTERCHANGEABLE.

**FRANCES ARMSTRONG** – FATHER HAD A WOUND IN HIS FACE FROM SHRAPNEL WOUND

**BRIAN MULLARKEY** – FATHER HAD PROFOUND SHELL SHOCK

**EVELYN HICKSON** – FATHER DIED IN THE WAR, GREW UP AS ONLY CHILD

**EDWARD SWANN** – FATHER HAD DOUBLE LEG AMPUTATION AND RIGHT ARM PARTIAL AMPUTATION

**SCENE ONE:**

[DARKNESS. A POOL OF LIGHT GROWS AROUND JACK ARMSTRONG WHO IS SEATED IN A HIGH-BACKED CHAIR. HIS DRESS IS FORMAL. HE IS WELL KEMPT. THE BANDAGED SIDE OF HIS FACE REMAINS AWAY FROM THE AUDIENCE FOR THE INITIAL PART OF THE SCENE. HE HAS A PEN AND BOOK IN HIS LAP.]

JACK: It is a curious thing that at my age—fifty-five last birthday—I should find myself taking up a pen to try to write a history. I wonder what sort of a history it will be when I have finished it, if ever I come to the end of the adventure! I have done a good many things in my life—but I do not think I would go through the last fifteen or sixteen months again for anything, no, not even if I knew that I should come out safe at the end. But then I am a timid man, and dislike violence; moreover, I am almost sick of adventure.

[IMPERCEPTIBLY, FRANCES (9) SNAKES OUT FROM BEHIND THE ARMCHAIR AND MOVES TO READ THE BOOK OVER HER FATHER'S SHOULDER. IT IS *KING SOLOMON'S MINES*. SHE KNOWS SHE CANNOT SIT ON HIS LAP, BUT THE INSTINCT IS STILL THERE. JACK IS DELIGHTED THAT SHE SHOULD WANT TO SHARE HIS STORY]

JACK: (reading) I wonder why I am going to write this book: it is not in my line. I am not a literary man; though let me try to set down my reasons, just to see if I have any. First reason: Because Sir Henry Curtis and Captain John Good asked me.

[JACK'S BANDAGED FACE IS NOW FULLY REVEALED]

JACK: (reading) Second reason: Because I am laid up here at Durban with this pain. Ever since that confounded lion got hold of me I have been liable to this trouble in my left leg, and being rather bad just now, it makes me limp more than ever.

[BEHIND THE PAIR, THE ROOM COMES INTO LIFE. THE LIGHT GROWS AS RUTH ARMSTRONG (FRANCES'S MOTHER) ENTERS WITH BAGS. SHE WEARS A VAD NURSING UNIFORM WHICH IS STILL WELL PRESERVED AFTER HER SHIFT. SHE SEES THE PAIR BUT OFFERS NO IMMEDIATE COMMENT. SHE WATCHES THEM AS SHE OPENS POST]

FRONT PARLOUR. LATE AFTERNOON

JACK: (reading) There must be some poison in a lion's teeth, otherwise how is it that when your wounds are healed they break out again? It is a hard thing when one has shot sixty-five lions or more, as I have in the course of my life, that the sixty-sixth should chew your leg like a quid of tobacco.

RUTH: Frances?

JACK: (reading) Third reason: Because I want my boy Harry, who is studying to become a doctor, to have something to amuse him and keep him out of mischief for a week or so.

RUTH: Frances. Will you come on?

FRANCES: We've only just begun.

RUTH: Daddy needs to rest his eye. Not strain it on silly boy's adventure stories.

FRANCES: It is not a boy's story.

JACK: Quite right Frances. Nor, is it silly.

RUTH: Well that's as maybe – but I have to see to Daddy, and this King Solomon is not helping. Can you make a start on the table?

FRANCES: Daddy?

RUTH: Daddy.

JACK: Go on, Frances. Can you lay an extra place for Gagoola?

RUTH: I'll be back with the linseed. I need to change out of these things first.

[JACK AND FRANCES WATCH RUTH GO. WITHOUT HESITATION THEY BOTH CARRY ON WITH THE BOOK. FRANCES SITS ON JACK'S LAP]

JACK: (reading) Hospital work must sometimes pall and grow rather dull, for even of cutting up dead bodies there may come satiety -

[MIDWAY THROUGH THIS SECTION, FRANCES ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY. JACK CONTINUES TO READ]

FRANCES: He was a very kind man. A wonderful father. He really was ... no doubt because he knew he hadn't long to live.

[FRANCES KISSES HIS DAMAGED EYE AND MOVES OUT OF THE FRAME, AND JACK'S READING EBBS AWAY]

JACK: (reading) - and as this history will not be dull, whatever else it may be -

FRANCES: When I was born my father ran for the man eight doors up. I was taking fits and was christened over the fire.

JACK: (reading) it will put a little life into things for a day or two while Harry is reading of our adventures.

FRANCES: I was his porcelain girl. I was delicate, white-faced. I played on it lovely if I was in trouble. And I got away with it too. I only had to tremble a little ... and I could see him looking at me, as if to say, "I hope she's not going to faint!"

[RUTH RE-ENTERS WITH MEDICAL SUPPLIES. THE DOMESTIC SCENE CONTINUES TO PLAY UNDER FRANCES'S WORDS]

JACK: She does it too tight.

RUTH: Tell her next time.

JACK: Have you seen the size of her arms?

RUTH: Yes, and mind you only look at her arms.

FRANCES: He always thought I was delicate, and he used to pick me up and say, "This one'll never go to work. I'll look after her all her life".

RUTH: I'm not happy about this.

JACK: Just pack it up Ruby.

RUTH: I think its getting worse. I think the colour is changing.

JACK: A couple of days a week at the Auxiliary hospital and now you're a specialist surgeon.

RUTH: Jack. I'm being serious.

JACK: Don't be. The only thing it changes is your beautiful face.

FRANCES: They kept cutting away at it, his face. A bit away, and a bit away, till in the end, I can remember his face with a big hole. I remember his face with two gaping mouths. I don't remember him as a well man. I remember him as a man that always had his face wrapped up in a white bandage, but I remember a man that was always cheerful – never moaned. He taught me how to ride a bike, he told me where to look for birds, and he was very well-read, an avid reader. The stories we shared.

[NOW THERE IS ONLY FRANCES ON STAGE. SHE CONTINUES - ]

FRANCES: It was a war-wound behind his eye, and the authorities refused to take his eye out saying that he could see. But he knew the poison shell was behind it, because the Army doctor had told him. If they'd removed the eye, they could have saved it, and they could have saved him. But it turned cancerous, so eventually they had to take it out anyway.

Everyone was so sorry for my mother, because she nursed my dad for years. All the relatives had drummed it into me; "Look after your mother, Frances, because she's had it so hard". Oh, and she had it rough. I think we just knew we had to look after each other.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 2:**

[AT THE OFFICE OF NORWICH UNION INSURANCE, RENEWALS DEPARTMENT. ALBERT MULLARKEY'S SUPERIOR, JEFFREY SMITH ARRIVES IN ALBERT'S OFFICE. HE OPENS A CUPBOARD FROM WHICH PAPER CASCADES. THE PAPER FLOODS ALL AROUND THEIR FEET AND CATCHES ALBERT TO THE SPOT.]

INTERIOR OFFICE. LATE MORNING.

JEFFREY: So. You see what a difficult position you've put us in. Me in.

ALBERT: I was getting round to it.

JEFFREY: Yes, but you're never arriving, are you, Mr Mullarkey?

ALBERT: Things have slipped a little. All these new policies, protocols –

JEFFREY: Have been in place for eight years, Mr Mullarkey.

ALBERT: Was I away for that long?

JEFFREY: You came back in '19, Mr Mullarkey.

ALBERT: I am a bit out of sorts.

JEFFREY: We are all grateful for your service.

ALBERT: When I am fit again, you will not find me depressing you with thoughts like these.

JEFFREY: But this has become....unsustainable.

ALBERT: I won't describe that trench to you, mother, until I have forgotten it a little.

JEFFREY: Your mind doesn't seem on the job anymore.

ALBERT: All this place is one vast cemetery.

JEFFREY: Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable in a less pressured environment

ALBERT: For 500 hundred yards it is paved with English dead.

JEFFREY: Perhaps you'd feel better with your feet up at home

ALBERT: It was as though some terrible force had ripped him into a thousand pieces

JEFFREY: In your garden. Looking after the vegetables.

ALBERT: He was thrown out the pit like a roll of the dice.

JEFFREY: If you can manage to keep them alive, that is!

ALBERT: His back was full of punctures, blood bubbles were wheezing out of the holes as he breathed.

JEFFREY: Perhaps it would help you to take your mind off things.

ALBERT: The smell is blood. The sleep is a stupor. The dream is the tat-tat-tat of a machine gun. The awakening is sick and grey.

JEFFREY: Perhaps you'd feel more like yourself.

ALBERT: Ellos murieron por nuestra propia artillería

JEFFREY: There is no need to come in for the rest of the week.

ALBERT: No nos dejaron a recoger y enterrar los cuerpos

JEFFREY: Heck. There's no need to come back after lunch.

ALBERT: Tienes que caminar a través de los cuerpos muertos

JEFFREY: We'll send your things on in the car, Mr Mullarkey.

ALBERT: No puedo describir los lugares que vi. Pero nunca olvidaré.

JEFFREY: Send my... regards to your wife and family.

[BRIAN MULLARKEY COMES IN TO THE STAGE SPACE. HE CAREFULLY, COMPASSIONATELY TIDIES UP ALL THE PAPERS BACK INTO THE CUPBOARD]

BRIAN: He was at the Somme, which was in 1916. He got into the mess of the Somme. A black evil waste he called it, the dead and the living sharing the same space. And ... he suffered with the mustard gas, and ... erm ... some shrapnel wounds to one of the legs.

He was discharged as fit, but advised not to work for a year. And when you have a young family, it's really not on (LAUGHS). And so he went back to work, you know, apparently quite successfully. But then his work began to drop off and I'm told that he used to spend long periods standing looking out of the office window, and it became apparent that his employment had to ... had to finish. Come on Dad, it's time to go.

[BRIAN GIVES HIS FATHER HIS JACKET AND BRIEFCASE AND HELPS HIM TO LEAVE THE OFFICE. HE PICKS UP THE FINAL PIECE OF PAPER LEFT ON THE FLOOR AND READS - ]

BRIAN: "Such a long period since his retirement, he'll be recollected by comparatively few of the present Head Office staff, but he will be remembered for his

kindly, if rather eccentric disposition. To his wife and family we offer our sincere condolences”, and that’s my father’s obituary from his career with Norwich Union.

[BRIAN FOLDS UP THE PAPER AND PLACES IT IN HIS POCKET]

MOVE TO:

### **SCENE 3:**

[EDWARD SWANN ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE – SOME OF WHICH COULD BE RECORDED DELIVERY. AS EDWARD STARTS TO TELL THE STORY OF HIS FATHER’S INJURIES, HE IS JOINED BY THE COMPANY. AS EDWARD SPEAKS THEY PERFORM A STYLISED PHYSICAL BALLET OF FRANK’S WARTIME STORY AND HIS ACCOMMODATION TO HIS INJURIES. SWOOPING, FALLING, LEAPING, STAYING, STALKING, THEY ARE BIRDS, THEY ARE INSECTS, THEY ARE MAMMALS. LIKE A SHOAL OF FISHES THEIR MOVEMENTS ARE NECESSARILY COMPLEMENTARY, BUT NOT IDENTICAL]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE.

EDWARD: Frank Swann, my father, joined the war in 1915. He was a volunteer in the Northumberland Fusiliers. They seemed to move everybody as far away as possible from where they came! He was a runner. They used to run the messages between the camps, reconnaissance missions that sort of thing, second most dangerous job after stretcher-bearers supposedly ... And of course, one day he was sent up on the front-line and he got hit – bang! His troop saw him hit, but weren’t able to pull him back in. ... He did say that he was left out in the no-man’s land sort of thing, in the mud, for quite a long while before they found him. It was October 1917, at Passchendaele ... the Battle of Ypres. It was nothing but mud. They had sent all these men to fight in a lake of mud.

He had two artificial legs. They amputated both legs. Both legs. And above the knee which made it worse. Both legs. There was just the stump, with a sort of loose end. Both legs. I know when I used to see them, I didn’t like the look of them! Both legs. They looked horrible! And that’s how it is, you know, two short stumps ... that was all it was. Both legs. Short stumps.

He had these two big sticks, and he used to sort of stalk around, if he had to get up ... like, if he wanted to go to the toilet, he’d get up out of the chair, and he’d stalk ... just like that, you know. Stalking on his short stumps. Both legs.

The artificial legs fitted over the stump, and finished up in the foot. Both legs. They were great big things, you know, metal and that, and as a kid, I had a job to carry them across the room, you know. The weight of them legs! Both legs. Metal and that.

He'd stand up ... and then he would ... fling the leg ... the stump ... fling the leg out like that ... And then the stick, he'd take the next step. And then he'd fling the leg forward again. Kicking it forward to make it straighten out. And it would click ... stand down, and then he'd stand up on the heel, and bring the other leg up behind it, push that one forward. Fling the leg. Kick the leg. Both legs.

He was hit by ... you know, it was a shell ... Both legs. And the top of his arm was very badly damaged. The right arm. They finally got it down to that level. He couldn't use it much at all. The right arm. Both legs. He only had one limb that was fully functioning, his left arm.

There was never anybody took an exception... nobody stopped to stare ... you know. No. No. Well, I mean, there was ... always ... plenty of people... plenty of people walking around with sticks, and crutches, plenty of people like that, you know.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 4:**

[EVELYN ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE

EVELYN: My father's walking stick stood in the corner of our kitchen, standing sentry by the fireplace. And one day my mother picked it up when I was being particularly naughty, and she was going after me, and I remember saying to her, oh I had some sass, 'What would my daddy say if he saw you were going to hit me with his stick?'

[AS EVELYN IS TELLING THE STORY, SHE IS INTERRUPTED BY A SMALL GIRL, MAYBE ABOUT 6-7 YEARS OLD. AT FIRST EVELYN REMAINS IN HER WORLD, SPEAKING TO THE AUDIENCE AND TRYING NOT TO CONCEDE TO THE INTRUSIVE MEMORY. EVELYN IS KINDLY TO THE GIRL AT FIRST – IF A LITTLE BEWILDERED BY HER PRESENCE]

BETTY: Is it not my turn to play with the Jeanie doll?

EVELYN: Of course, my mother never did hit me.

BETTY: Because you said I could have a turn.

EVELYN: Mother always put herself in-between me and any trouble.

BETTY: This isn't fair. Give her to me; it's my turn to play with her.

EVELYN: Hang on a second, pet, I'm trying to talk to these people.

BETTY: You are such a selfish little brat. You just want to keep her to yourself.

EVELYN: Honestly, my love, I don't have anything to give you. Now, I'm trying to -

BETTY: You are nothing but a spoiled brat, Evelyn Hickson. I know you don't want to share her with me.

EVELYN: Well, now. I don't think that's a very nice way to talk to –

BETTY: Just because they feel sorry for you, that's why. That's why your nannie and granddad gave you all this stuff.

EVELYN: I think you ought to go now –

BETTY: They all feel sorry for you because you haven't got a daddy.

[EVELYN SNAPS INTO BEING A YOUNG CHILD AGAIN AND THEY ARE BOTH SQUARING UP TO EACH OTHER AS TWO YOUNG CHILDREN]

THE BACK GARDEN. LATE AFTERNOON

EVELYN: Yes, I have.

BETTY: You haven't! He died in France.

EVELYN: No he didn't! He's across the sea, and he's coming back when I get to be a big girl.

BETTY: He can't ever come back! My mummy told me he died in France.

EVELYN: I have got a daddy. I'll show you him.

[EVELYN DRAGS BETTY TO HAVE A LOOK AT THE PORTRAIT OF HER FATHER THAT HANGS OVER THE FIREPLACE. IT IS ENORMOUS, OUTSIZED AND IMPOSSIBLY REGAL. BETTY'S SPIRIT BEGINS TO PUNCTURE IN THE FACE OF EVELYN'S ZEAL]

LIVING ROOM. LATE AFTERNOON

EVELYN: Look.

BETTY: I want my things. I'm going home.

EVELYN: Here he is, that's my daddy. Now take it back.

BETTY: I will not.

[EVELYN'S MOTHER, LAURA HICKSON ENTERS, DISTURBED FROM HER TASKS]

LAURA: Now, what's all this commotion about?

EVELYN: She said I haven't got a daddy.

BETTY: Well. She hasn't –

EVELYN: Tell her. Tell her Mummy.

LAURA: Betty. I think you ought to go home now.

BETTY: But my dolls and my-

LAURA: You can tell your mother that I will bring them over later, in person.

BETTY: Yes, Mrs Hickson.

[BETTY LEAVES]

EVELYN: She said. She said he was dead.

LAURA: What a lot of rubbish that girl talks. I wouldn't listen to a single thing that girl says.

EVELYN: She said he was dead in France.

[LAURA HICKSON TAKES EVELYN BY THE SHOULDERS]

LAURA: Now you listen to me. Listen. Your daddy will come back when you're a big girl.... How could he not come back for you...?

Mind you, why would he want to come back to such a grubby face. Go. Go wash yourself.

[EVELYN IS ALONE ON THE STAGE ONCE MORE. SHE ADDRESSES US -]

EVELYN: My father's walking stick stood in the corner of our kitchen, standing sentry by the fireplace. A bolt of rosewood and a handful of ivory at the top, it was always waiting there for him to take it up again. My mother often let her hand trail over it as she busied about in the kitchen. I used to think it was her way of signalling to him. 'We're thinking of you' tapped out in a fractured Morse Code between the sink and the oven. 'We love you' the touch would say, 'Come home'. And years later, long after I knew he was never going to come home, when his stick would accompany me for the miles I walked the dogs against the big, seaside skies, I still felt like, somewhere, somehow, the universe would connect us.

I lost the stick on another walk. I was in some woods and just put it down. When I came back it had gone. But don't let that spoil the story.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 5:**

[BRIAN MULLARKEY AND EDWARD SWANN ARE KICKING THEIR HEELS IN THE STREET OUTSIDE FRANCES ARMSTRONG'S HOUSE. EVELYN HICKSON ARRIVES. THEY ARE ALL IN THEIR SUNDAY BEST AND ARE AGED AROUND 10 OR 11 IN THIS SCENE.]

EDWARD: Look out. Here she comes.

BRIAN: We could peg it?

EDWARD: Nah. She'd only tell our mams.

EVELYN: What are you doing out here?

BRIAN: Going home.

EVELYN: No you weren't Brian Mullarkey. Can I play too?

EDWARD: It's cars, Evie. You wouldn't like it.

EVELYN: I will. I bet I've been in more cars than you.

BRIAN: Can't you find some girls to play with?

EVELYN: They're boring.

BRIAN: Still fighting?

EVELYN: No. I'd just much rather play with you.

EDWARD: They're still fighting.

EVELYN: Are we not allowed to go in?

EDWARD: I think the party's off.

EVELYN: But my dress.

BRIAN: All the women are in there.

EVELYN: (to Brian) It wouldn't matter to a fleabag like you, but my mum'll kill me if she sees me sitting in the road.

BRIAN: So, go home then.

EVELYN: I'm not going home.

EDWARD: Me neither.

EVELYN: My granny is round at ours, and they always end up crying when they're together.

EDWARD: Shall we go to the ponds?

EVELYN: Shouldn't we wait for Frances?

EDWARD: I don't know if she'll be allowed out.

BRIAN: I only came for the cake. Mum made me miss dinner because she thought I was going to get a party tea.

EVELYN: Here. We can share these.

[EVELYN PULLS OUT A BAG OF SWEETS]

EDWARD: Walnut Whips? Where did you get those?

EVELYN: My granny brought them for me from her shop. I was going to give them to Frances as a present, but if she's not coming out...

BRIAN: We'd better not let them go to waste.

EDWARD: Every cloud.

EVELYN: Should we save some?

BRIAN: She might not even come out today.

EDWARD: She'll have all that cake to herself.

BRIAN: Evie, you can share my chips next time.

EVELYN: I don't want your scrap-end chips.

BRIAN: Suit yourself, but you don't know what you're missing.

EDWARD: We could go and get our nets? See what we could catch?

EVELYN: I'm not sure I like parties anyway. When the daddies start making everyone do games. It's just so...immature.

EDWARD: Yeah.

EVELYN: I bet their daddies would much rather be somewhere else instead of a silly children's party.

BRIAN: Parties are for babies anyway. Babies and girls.

EVELYN: So what are you doing here then?

BRIAN: My mum made me come. That and the cake.

EDWARD: My brother said the herons are nesting in the trees by the pond, we could go take a look.

EVELYN: I thought you were supposed to be doing extra study for your scholarship exams?

BRIAN: What's the point of that?

EDWARD: We went up to this school in Langley. For a visit. There was a tennis court, a swimming pool, and all the buildings looked like churches.

BRIAN: And you're going to fit in with all them toffs in their boaters and blazers, are you? They'll think you're there to deliver the coal.

EVELYN: I'm going to pass the 11+.

EDWARD: Look, it's not going to happen.

EVELYN: My granny says she'll buy me a new uniform when I pass my exams.

BRIAN: If your granny's so rich, why was your mum out hawking old clothes the other day?

EVELYN: No she was not.

BRIAN: She so was.

EVELYN: And you've got no right to call anyone else's family, Brian Mullarkey. At least we all manage to wash ourselves –

BRIAN: You shut your mouth.

[FRANCES EXITS FROM THE HOUSE]

EDWARD: Shut up. Both of you.

BRIAN: Poor spoilt little princess. Only with no crown and no –

EDWARD: You all right Frances?

FRANCES: Did you save me any sweets?

BRIAN: We didn't have none.

FRANCES: I saw you eating them from my bedroom window.

BRIAN: Sorry. Happy Birthday Frances.

EVELYN: Yeah, Happy Birthday.

BRIAN: Shame about the party.

EVELYN: Shut up Brian.

FRANCES: It is a shame. I was really looking forward to it.

EDWARD: What happened?

FRANCES: My daddy died this morning.

BRIAN: Bloody hell.

EVELYN: Sorry.

FRANCES: That's okay.... I don't know what I'm supposed to do now.

EDWARD: Do you want to go somewhere?

FRANCES: I don't think I'm allowed to go out.

EVELYN: I think you are meant to stay indoors.

BRIAN: Did you get to look at him?

FRANCES: No. My mum wouldn't let me. She's like a cat in a cage. She looks like she wants to run out of her own body, tear it off.

EDWARD: Perhaps you're best off out the way for a bit.

FRANCES: I've never seen her like that.

EVELYN: Come on. We'll look after you.

EDWARD: There are herons down by the ponds, we could go there if you liked.

FRANCES: Guess so.

BRIAN: Wait. I've got some chews here. I stole them off Bernie and I was going to keep them, but you can have them if you like.

FRANCES: Thanks. I don't think we'll get to eat the cake now.

EVELYN: No.

EDWARD: Come on. I'll show you where they're nesting.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 6:**

[FRANCES ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE.]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE.

FRANCES: I passed the first half – you sat it in two parts, this Scholarship to go to grammar school. And I was worried sick for fear I passed, because I knew my mother couldn't afford the uniform. So I made sure I didn't pass the second half. I left school at 14, like we all had to. Oh well.

[IN THE BACKGROUND THE 'WOMEN' BRING OUT A TABLE ON WHICH TO MAKE AND BAKE. THEIR MOVEMENTS ARE EXAGGERATED AND REPETITIOUS, THEY ECHO AND CHASE EACH OTHER.]

FRANCES: But don't think of it as a deprived childhood, it wasn't. We had no money, but we had everything that mattered. My mother had it hard, but she was very loving, very kind, a very capable woman. She was a good manager. She could do everything. And I can remember she made everything. She baked ... it was all home-made stuff. But a treat was a bought cake – to us – because we never had anything like that...

[THE FLOUR FROM THE CAKE MAKING CREATES SUBTLE DUST CLOUDS, AS THIS SECTION PROGRESSES, THE FLOUR BEGINS TO LOOK MORE LIKE CLOUDS OF SMOKE. EXPLOSIONS NOW RICOCHET AT HOME AND THE WOMEN ARE ASSAULTED AS THE SMOKE THICKENS. THIS IS THE WAR ON THE HOME FRONT.]

FRANCES: There was a bakery at the end of the road, and they sold butterfly cakes with fresh cream in, and I remember once I was off school, ill... and my dad was also in bed ill – one of his ill times when his eye was getting worse – and I got into bed with him during the day, and my mother had brought my dad a butterfly cake as a treat. And he gave it to me, and I remember her coming in and saying, “Oh, love, I was

giving you a treat”, and he says, “Let her have it, she’ll enjoy it better than me”. He lived for his children.

[FRANCES TAKES HER SEAT BEHIND A TABLE WHICH HAS NOW BECOME A DESK]

FRANCES: He met us from school every day. He had a sweet in his pocket for me, “Don’t tell your mum, because she says I’ll spoil your dinner!” And he’d hide, and let me think he wasn’t coming, and he’s round a shop doorway and he’d jump out at me when I got there! Yes, I used to love him to meet us leaving school. It was the one upside to him not being able to work.

So don’t have visions of a... a deprived childhood. We had no money, but we had everything that mattered. So, as I say, don’t imagine it was a deprived childhood, it wasn’t. I was lucky.

**SCENE 7:**

[FROM ON HIGH IN THE DIM LIGHT WE HEAR THE OPENING PHRASES OF *DIDO'S LAMENT* ' 'THY HAND BELINDA'. THE VOICE IS HIGH AND FINE AND POISED. TRADITIONAL ICONOGRAPHY OF ARMISTICE DAY / REMEMBRANCE SWAMP THE SPACE. 'LEST WE FORGET' AND LARGE UNION JACK FLAGS, WREATHS, WHITE CROSSES.]

SOLOIST: "When I am laid, am laid in earth,  
May my wrongs create  
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;  
Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.  
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate."

[THE CHILDREN SIT AT THEIR SCHOOL DESKS FASHION RED POPPIES FROM TISSUE PAPER AND CARD. THEY THEN JOIN IN THE SINGING, SCHOOL-CHOIR STYLE – IT IS MORE OF A RECITATION AND IS FAR LESS POLISHED AND ENUNCIATED. THE SONG FINISHES AND THEY RESUME THEIR POSITIONS AT THEIR DESKS WITH ALL THE POISE AND STILLNESS OF TEN YEAR OLD CHILDREN.]

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 8:**

[THE CHILDREN'S TEACHER, MISS WARD, STEPS OUT ON TO THE STAGE AND HEADS UP THE CLASSROOM]

JUNIOR CLASSROOM. MID-MORNING. NOVEMBER

TEACHER: Well, that was better in rehearsal.

HARRY: Miss. Miss!

TEACHER: Yes. Harry, and John, I know you will be leaving early today.

HARRY: We've got to knacker the cows today miss.

TEACHER: Thank you for the biology lesson, Deller. The term is castrate, and you would do well to mark that word when you are in my presence.

HARRY: We'll bring you some back if you like, miss.

TEACHER: And if you think that talk like that will get you a detention, you are very wrong Harry Deller. Your mother has already prepared me for your shirking tactics. I suggest you use the events of this morning to reflect upon how a real man must face his duty. Now, if we have your permission, we must get back to the business of this very important day. It must be nearly the time, yes.

[EVELYN TURNS TO ADDRESS THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY. THE TEACHER CONTINUES BELOW ALL OF EVELYN'S COMMENTS]

EVELYN: (to audience) I've always hated Armistice Day.

TEACHER: (reading) At the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month the guns fell silent on the Western Front, to bring to an end the Great War – (looking up with

sympathy) And this is also to think of Evelyn, and remember her daddy who has not come back from the War -

EVELYN: (to audience) I wasn't too upset, because I didn't believe her.

TEACHER: (reading) Let us remember before God those who have died for their country in war; those whom we knew, and whose memory we treasure; and all who have lived and died in the service of mankind.

EVELYN: (to audience) I wasn't worried, I thought, "What rubbish is she talking about? Of course he'll come back!"

TEACHER: (reading) "They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning. We will remember them".

CHILDREN: "We will remember them."

[WHILE THE TEACHER CONTINUES TO READ, FRANCES AND EVELYN TALK UNDERNEATH.]

TEACHER: "They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;  
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;  
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;  
They sleep beyond England's foam."

FRANCES: Evelyn. Evelyn. Evie.

EVELYN: What? Shush. You'll get us told off.

FRANCES: Are you all right?

EVELYN: Of course I am.

FRANCES: But what she said about....?

EVELYN: I know what she said, and she is talking out of her hat.

TEACHER: Now, we've got to all be very quiet for two minutes. Especially you, Evelyn, you of all people should know this is not the time for chitchat. This is the two-minute silence we're to observe to remember all those who fell in the Great War.

[THE CHILDREN ALL FILE PAST EVELYN AND DROP THEIR MADE POPPIES ON TO HER]

EVELYN: When I was little, our front garden fronts on to a road which went near to one of the hospitals, where there were a lot of wounded Tommies, soldiers recuperating, and I used to go to the gate and search all these men's faces, thinking, "Perhaps one of them's my father, and he's forgotten where he is, who he is". Of course, it wasn't.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 9:**

[THROUGHOUT THIS SCENE, BRIAN ADDRESS IS TO THE AUDIENCE, EVEN THOUGH HE IS PARTICIPATING IN THE ACTION. BRIAN IS A YOUNGER MAN HERE, EVEN FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT OF MEMORY]

BRIAN: Very occasionally ... he ... he would improve. I remember him once trying to ride a bicycle, which he hadn't done for years, and he fell off and laughed about it.

[ALBERT MULLARKEY SITS AT THE PIANO IN HIS HOUSE – THE INSTRUMENT HAS BECOME A BIT RICKETY AS ITS CENTRALITY HAS WANED. ALBERT SINGS 'KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING'. HE IS JOINED BY A YOUNG BRIAN WHO IS CLEARLY HEARTENED AND MOVED BY THIS MOMENT OF 'LUCIDITY']

PARLOUR: EARLY EVENING

BRIAN: He was a very good pianist. He used to play the piano, and people used to stand outside the house and listen to him – he was that good. Yeah, musically, he was very, very talented. And none of that rubbed off on me, neither his talent for music, nor painting or drawing, no ... none of that.

[IN HIS MIND, ALBERT MOVES TO BACK TO TIMES OF ARMY COMRADESHIP AND HE IS JOINED AT THE PIANO BY A GROUP OF ARMY MEN. THE PRESENCE OF BRIAN IS SWAMPED AND HE FADES FROM THE SCENE. THE SINGING OF THE SONG BECOMES MORE WILD AND BOISTEROUS. ONLY ALBERT'S PLAYING BEGINS TO TAKE ON A VIOLENT AND UNPREDICTABLE TURN AS THE FIELDS OF HIS IMAGINATION BLAZE. THE REST OF THE MEN BACK OFF. HIS SON BRIAN RE-EMERGES BACK INTO THE SCENE]

BRIAN: He never raised a finger against any of us children. When I was ill, he always used to come and sit by me, no matter how long. And the young children in the wider

family ... you know, when they were babies, he used to take great delight in nursing the babies. Everyone said he was of a kindly disposition, which he was...

[AS ALBERT FINISHES WITH A TINY TINKLING VERSION OF THE REFRAIN 'SMILE, SMILE, SMILE', BRIAN DEFIANTLY REMAINS WITH HIM.]

BRIAN: He was accepted by the local community and so on... then, of course, there was a great deal of sympathy for my mother, you know, in particular, from the neighbours ... but there was very little interplay between him and anyone else because he ... most of the time he wouldn't speak, you know, so how do you have a conversation with somebody who doesn't speak? How can you get to know them?

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 10:**

The Song of The Soldier in The Field

Looking out, I saw a Bosch not more than 15 yards away  
He threw a bomb plumb at me and I dodged it  
You have no idea of the subtle thrill on a good moonlight night  
Opening a sudden burst of fire on the Hun.  
I had a gun knocked out the other day  
Half an hour to find and collect the unfortunate sentry.  
The tat-tat-tat of the German machine guns  
Would rattle in your dreams

The dead men lay amidst earth and broken timber  
For 500 hundred yards it is paved with English dead.  
A sacrilege to step over them  
In places you must walk upon them,  
They lie in heaps.  
Dead bodies were lying out in front  
Dead bodies taint the air  
All this place is one vast cemetery.

The smell of blood and the fumes of the shell  
Filled me with nausea and I winced at the sight  
Of blood bubbles wheezing out of the holes  
In his back as he breathed  
Never before  
Had I seen a man who had just been killed  
From the sick, grey, faces of the file  
I saw that these feelings were shared

MOVE TO:

## SCENE 11

[FRANCES ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE.]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE

FRANCES: Oh, she just cried for two days. She just was ... she was working, she was cooking and doing everything, she didn't give into it, but she was just crying as she walked around. But ... and I ... all I can remember is... I have great difficulty in crying, I always have had. As a child I had. But I can remember waking up next morning, every morning for ages after, and my cheeks were stiff with salt. I couldn't cry in front of anyone, so I must have cried all the time I was asleep.

When he died, the biggest fear I had, at that age, was if my mother died. That was the biggest emotion. I was frightened of my mother dying, because I used to wonder what would happen to us. That she would die, and us children would be left. And I used to pass our auntie's house to and from school and I used to look every time we passed because, in those days, if people died, relatives drew the curtains – and I used to look at this auntie's house and think, “Oh, at least my mum hasn't died today”.

[FRANCES AND HER MOTHER BEGIN TO WALK ON THE HEATH. IN THE PACE, FRANCES IS LEFT BEHIND. FRANCES'S MOTHER CROSSES OVER WITH ALBERT MULLARKEY WHO IS ALSO MARCHING ACROSS THE HEATH.]

FRANCES: When he knew he was dying, my father said to this neighbour, Mrs. Penrose, “Would you promise, if anything happens, to go and see Ruth every day, and make her go for a walk?” And she did. This neighbour kept her promise. She called every afternoon, and took her for a walk, to help her get over it.

MOVE TO:

## SCENE 12

[ALBERT MULLARKEY IS WALKING OUT ON MOUSEHOLD HEATH. THERE IS SILENCE. SOFTLY, IMPERCEPTIBLY AT FIRST THERE IS THE SHARP PING OF SNIPER FIRE. HE HURRIES HIS PACE. THE NOISES GET LOUDER AND FROM ALL DIRECTIONS, AND HE RUNS. HE SPRINTS WITH A GUTTURAL SHOUT. HE RUNS AND JUMPS INTO HIS KITCHEN, WHERE -

ALBERT STANDS BEFORE THE KITCHEN DOOR. IT IS SILENT. HE GOES TO LAY HIS HAND ON THE DOOR AND THERE IS A LOW CACOPHONY OF GUNFIRE. HE GOES TO OPEN THE DOOR A CRACK AND THERE IS THE SOUND OF A LARGE EXPLOSION. HE HURRIEDLY SHUTS THE DOOR AGAIN.

FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE SCENE WE SEE ALBERT STANDING BEFORE THE DOOR HANDLE. HE TRIES TO GO THROUGH THE DOOR, STRUGGLING TO COMMAND THE RATIONAL PART OF HIS BRAIN. EACH MOMENT OF PROXIMITY DETONATES THE BATTLEFIELD.

ALICE MULLARKEY IS COOKING. BRIAN MULLARKEY ENTERS]

KITCHEN. EARLY EVENING.

ALICE: Take that jacket off. And out of the cupboard.

BRIAN: I wasn't in the...

ALICE: I am all-seeing and you would do well to remember that.

[EXPLOSION AS ALBERT REACHES FOR THE DOOR]

BRIAN: What's for supper?

ALICE: Never-you-mind pie.

[BRIAN'S OLDER SIBLING, LIZZIE, ENTERS]

LIZZIE: (coming in) Be still my beating stomach. What is all this rubbish on the floor?

ALICE: Your father brought it back for us.

LIZZIE: A load of brambles and cinders?

ALICE: For the fire, yes.

[EXPLOSION AS ALBERT REACHES FOR THE DOOR]

LIZZIE: Toasty fire that will be.

BRIAN: We'll be roasting like pigeons.

ALICE: And I'll put both your backsides in it if you're not careful. Go wash up Bernie. Now.

LIZZIE: How long's Old Larkey been standing like that?

BRIAN: He could be on for a medal today.

[EXPLOSION AS ALBERT REACHES FOR THE DOOR]

LIZZIE: Well he needs to get out the way if I'm to go to the sink.

BRIAN: You can't. You can't. Five more minutes and he'll have passed his personal best.

LIZZIE: 'Scuse me Larkey.

ALICE: Bernie. Don't –

LIZZIE: Some of us have got places to go to.

[THE SOUND OF DEAFENING EXPLOSIONS AS BERNIE OPENS THE DOOR. HE GOES TO 'SAVE' HIS CHILD, BUT LIZZIE HAS GONE. ALBERT COWERS AND FALLS TO THE FLOOR. HE KEEPS HIS GAZE FIXED ON THE OPEN DOOR. THE EXPLOSIONS PETER OUT AS WE MOVE TO BRIAN'S MONOLOGUE]

BRIAN: You've ruined it now.

ALICE: Albert. Albert. Albert! Brian, come and give me a hand would you? Brian! Albert, you're in the kitchen, this is our kitchen, not the bloody Somme. Albert, you're home now. Brian get me a glass of water, something, someone, someone...

BRIAN: (to the audience) There are other little things. Just little things. When the new fireplace was put in, there's something in the new tiles, something that he really doesn't like. He won't ever look at it. Terrified to look at it. When he has to come through the living room to go to bed, he sidles through. His back towards the fireplace. Who knows what he sees in the tiles, faces of his men, the fields of France, or the devil himself? I've tried looking and looking and I just can't see what he sees.

[BRIAN STEPS OUT OF THE FRAME. IN THE BACKGROUND, THE KITCHEN SPACE IS OVERTAKEN BY LAURA HICKSON, EVELYN'S MOTHER. FOR A SHORT WHILE, THEY BOTH OCCUPY THE SAME SPACE ON STAGE BUT EXISTING IN PARALLEL REALITIES.]

BRIAN: In thunderstorms it was terrible ... with the noise. The way it affected him. He'd shake. He said nothing, but ... but he shook. And ... he then ... he wouldn't sit at the table with us, he sat in the kitchen on his own, and all his time in the house was spent virtually in the kitchen. We got him what he wanted – a Spanish dictionary, and he said he was going to learn Spanish ... but, of course he just used to read the

dictionary – read and reread this Spanish dictionary, looking for something, and then ... but who knows what was going on in his mind.

MOVE TO:

### **SCENE 13:**

[EVELYN'S MOTHER, LAURA HICKSON, OPENS A PARCEL AT THE KITCHEN TABLE. THE MULLARKEY FAMILY ALL RECOIL AT THE CONTENTS. THE TUNIC, SHIRT AND TROUSERS THAT EVELYN'S FATHER, HENRY HICKSON HAD DIED IN. THERE IS A COLLECTIVE HOLDING OF BREATH, NOT KNOWING HOW TO RESPOND WITH ANY COMFORT. THEY DRIFT OUT OF THE SPACE. LAURA IS LEFT ALONE IN THE SPACE AS SHE FORENSICALLY LAYS OUT THE CLOTHES ON THE TABLE]

#### KITCHEN. LATE EVENING

LAURA: These clothes smell of mud. But not ordinary mud. They do not smell of clean earth. They smell of metal earth. Iron-rich clay. He tunnelled out. He must have dug so deep that his clothes began to smell of the buried cities of Gaul. He would have become tangled up in an ancient haul of bronze. Where would he have broken new ground? It's a long way to come home from Alexandria.

This tunic has been split up the back. Slashed. How he must have snaked to avoid the knife. Viper-hooded bending back round to bite the hand that held him. They couldn't get at him, like catching a fish in the river with your bare hands; his silver scales flashed the sun in their eyes. A renegade rainbow darting away down-stream with a final flick of his tail-fin.

The shirt has been blown out at the back. It hangs in brittle ribbons. Look. Will you look at how he has exploded out of his own shirt? A thunder-blackened escape tunnel. How fast he must have moved to cause such damage to his own shirt. Like fire chasing a breath of air. He must have had trouble keeping his own skin pinned to his body.

But that's what happens when you love somebody. You'll do anything to be with them again. You'd do anything to make sure you came home.

[EVELYN'S MOTHER DIGS IN THE GARDEN. EFFICIENTLY AT FIRST, THEN MORE VIOLENTLY. FINALLY PUSHING THE CLOTHES DOWN INTO THE SOIL AS SHE BURIES THEM.]

GARDEN. NIGHT-TIME

LAURA: He has come home in his army uniform. If I put him back together under the earth, make a cleft here to tuck him under, a Juniper Tree to shelter him, I'll come back tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next spring, maybe, maybe I'll find him to have grown back again. His pale hands of jasmine twigs will fold around my face, and his cheeks full of pomegranate seeds, his kisses will run red.

Why do we tell each other such fairy stories? What lies beneath is always death and destruction and brutality and hurt and horror and holes and holes and holes in the breast pocket and an exit wound on the back bone and the blackest mud on his knees where he sank down. He died on his knees. And everything everything is soaked in blood, everything is saturated with his death, and nothing of the fine light of his life.

This isn't him anymore. This isn't him. I'm sorry, but this isn't him. I would know him anywhere.

[EVELYN TAKES OVER THE STAGE AND SPEAKS TO THE AUDIENCE AS HER MOTHER IS ENVELOPED IN DARKNESS.]

EVELYN: I've been twice or three times to visit his grave in France. My mother never went. No. She never... she never went further than Ilfracombe or Skegness or Mablethorpe. She didn't want to ... I wanted to take her, she said, "No, I couldn't bear to leave him". It was the thought of having to... knowing he's down there, lying down there, in a grave, and she just couldn't bring herself to go without being able to bring him back. No, she wouldn't go.

[EVELYN TALKS AS THE REST OF THE CAST BEGIN TO SOFTLY SING 'HANGING ON THE OLD BARBED WIRE']

EVELYN: I thought I'd feel different when I saw it, but I ... somehow I ... I didn't feel ... connected. It was a funny feeling. It's beautiful isolated country. I planted these purple pansies on the grave, (laughing) but I bet they didn't survive.

[EVELYN JOINS IN THE SINGING IN TRANSITION TO THE NEXT SCENE]

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 14:**

[BRIAN IS DOING PRESS-UPS AND CHIN-UPS AND SQUATS IN HIS BEDROOM. HE DIRECTLY ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE (RD?)]

BRIAN: I knew I had a father, and father was away. But I had no picture of him in my mind, And my first real memory was seeing him, as I remember it from the first time, which was when he returned from a time spent at Beckenham in Kent, which was some sort of convalescent or recuperation place ... and he was wearing a cap, he had a moustache which was neatly trimmed, a suit – and he looked like any normal person of that age at that time. He very quickly changed from being, you know, quite smart and clean to his completely ... erm ... neglected himself in terms of his clothing. And it went down very quickly from that.

[BRIAN PICKS UP HIS BOXING GLOVES AND EXITS THE SCENE AS THE SPACE IS TAKEN OVER BY FRANCES, EVELYN AND THEN EDWARD. THEY ARE NOW YOUNG ADULTS, ABOUT 14 YEARS OF AGE.]

FRANCES: Oi! Oi! You!

EDWARD: What? Places to go.

FRANCES: My bike Edward Swann.

EDWARD: I'm on an errand.

FRANCES: My dad brought me that bike.

EVELYN: No he never.

FRANCES: Well, he would have done.

EVELYN: Where you going?

EDWARD: Got to put 6d on Windsor Lad.

EVELYN: He'll have spent up all them winnings soon.

EDWARD: The chair's broken.

FRANCES: Family habit, breaking things.

EDWARD: Look. I'll get it fixed.

FRANCES: And mind you do.

EVELYN: What is up with you two?

FRANCES: Nothing.

EVELYN: You've hardly got a nice word for each other these days.

EDWARD: Like she said. Nothing.

FRANCES: And you can have your book back too.

EDWARD: Forgot you had it.

EVELYN: I'm going into town on the bus. Anyone want to come?

FRANCES: I'll come if we walk.

EVELYN: This hairdo isn't walking anywhere.

FRANCES: If I had my bike, I could have given you a backie.

EVELYN: Ergh. No thank you.

EDWARD: I'm off.

FRANCES: I thought you'd already gone.

[BRIAN ENTERS IN A RUSH WITH HIS BOXING GLOVES OVER HIS SHOULDER.]

BRIAN: Wait up. Wait, Ed, wait up. How was Carrow Road on Saturday?

EDWARD: What? The race runs in half an hour.

BRIAN: Who rattled your cage?

EDWARD: What the hell have you got there?

BRIAN: These? These are my new hobby.

EVELYN: They're enormous? They'll never fit you.

BRIAN: They were my dad's.

EVELYN: And what are you going to do with them?

BRIAN: I've been getting fit.

EVELYN: I thought you were looking a bit less scrawny.

FRANCES: Edward, you ought to take note.

EDWARD: Are you my old man?

BRIAN: I've been lifting his dumbbells too.

EDWARD: Just the kind of stuff we have lying around our house.

BRIAN: Look, look at my muscles.

EVELYN: Have you still got your magnifying glass, Eddie?

EDWARD: No. Look. There is a slight bump there. No. Wait. It's a bit of dirt.

FRANCES: At least Brian is trying to improve himself.

EDWARD: Meaning?

FRANCES: Becoming more sporty. Manly.

EVELYN: (laughing) Give over. He's still seven stone wet through.

EDWARD: It's not as if there's anyone round our way to do boxing with, or do football, or any -

BRIAN: You get to sit front row at the football.

EDWARD: In the bit with the other cripples!

EVELYN: Edward.

EDWARD: Yeah, I get a good view because my dad's in a chair.

FRANCES: At least you've got a dad.

EDWARD: (ambivalently) Yeah. At least I have.

BRIAN: Old Larkey ain't exactly going to take me for a kick about, or teach me how to fish.

FRANCES: He could put his beard in the water. There must be loads of food in there to attract the fish.

EVELYN: Frances.

BRIAN: (demonstrating) His new thing is dancing. Well sort of dancing. He starts off by tapping his feet and clicking his fingers and then he can't quite keep up with them. And by the end he's following himself around.

EVELYN: That's your dad.

BRIAN: I suppose so.

FRANCES: So, are you going to show us what you can do with these new boxing skills?

BRIAN: Yeah. Let me put these on first.

[BRIAN BEGINS TO PUT ON THE GLOVES AND EDWARD SNATCHES ONE UP AND BEGINS TO PUT IT ON.]

EDWARD: Here. Let me have a go. Let me have one.

BRIAN: How's that going to work?

FRANCES: I thought you had to go to the bookies for your dad?

EDWARD: Just a quick go. Bloody hell they're really heavy.

BRIAN: I know. It makes it really hard to pull your arm back.

[EDWARD AND BRIAN BEGIN TO MOCK SPAR. THEIR EGOS GET THE BETTER OF THEM AND IT SOON BECOMES MORE SERIOUS THAN EITHER OF THEM ATTENDED.]

EDWARD: Ow. My hand.

BRIAN: That hurt mine too.

EDWARD: Come on. Let's climb up here. Like a proper ring.

[THEY CLIMB UP ONTO THE LOW WALL.]

BRIAN: Like at the fair.

EDWARD: I'm not stripping down to my underpants.

FRANCES: Thank god.

EVELYN: Just be careful.

[EDWARD BEGINS TO VENT HIS AGGRESSION AND FEELINGS OF HUMILIATION]

BRIAN: Hey. Careful. What was that for?

EVELYN: All right. Stop it now.

FRANCES: Enough.

[EDWARD SWIPES HARD AT BRIAN, MISSES AND FALLS OFF THE WALL AWKWARDLY. HE WRITHES AROUND IN AGONY.]

EDWARD: Christ. Arrrrgh.

BRIAN: Bloody hell, Ed!

EDWARD: My shoulder.

FRANCES: God. Edward. Ed? Are you okay?

BRIAN: Ed! Ed, I'm so sorry.

EDWARD: It wasn't you, idiot. I slipped.

FRANCES: Ed. Come sit up against the wall.

[FRANCES TRIES TO PULL EDWARD UP TO A SEATED POSITION]

EDWARD: Arrgh. Don't move me.

EVELYN: He's a white as a sheet.

EDWARD: I'm going to be sick.

EVELYN: Your arm. Your arm's at a really funny angle.

FRANCES: Go, Brian. Go run for Dr Barker. Go.

EDWARD: Don't. I'll be fine.

FRANCES: He's going.

[BRIAN SHAKES HIMSELF OUT OF HIS PARALYSIS AND RUNS TO  
FETCH THE DOCTOR. FRANCES MINISTERS, EVELYN FLAPS.]

EVELYN: All I wanted to do today was to go into town.

EDWARD: We can't afford Dr. Barker.

FRANCES: We'll pay him.

EDWARD: With what?

FRANCES: We'll give him my bicycle.

EVELYN: Take the bus. Have a walk around.

FRANCES: We're not going to leave you like this.

EDWARD: Keep the book, will you.

FRANCES: What do I want with your books.

[FRANCES REMAINS IN THE SCENE AND DIRECTLY ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE, WHILST THE DOCTOR COMES TO MINISTER TO EDWARD AND TO PUT THE SHOULDER BACK IN ITS SOCKET.]

FRANCES: And I can remember the doctor coming down the street, his coat fanning out behind him. They had been Army men together, Dr Baker and his dad. Both served together. And Dr Baker tried to put Ed's arm above his head, and it was dislocated. Ed fainted, and the doctor said, "Oh, Good Lord, lad! You haven't got the guts your father had!" And Ed took it really badly. He said, "I wonder how he would like his broken arm lifted up over his shoulder!" I think something else broke in him that day.

MOVE TO:

## **SCENE 15:**

### The Song of The Soldier in The Hospital

My wound is dressed twice a day,  
And is more painful every time  
A sign,  
As I am assured,  
That it is healing up nicely.  
It has to be 'packed' at the lower entrance  
And a few yards of bandage are poked up  
With a knitting needle,  
To keep it open  
And allow it to discharge.  
A little blue mark on the top of my shoulder  
Where the bullet went in,  
And a long deep slit  
A few inches down my back  
Where it came out.  
Possibly it turned a little in its course.  
The diagnosis on my sheet is  
'Gun shot'  
Small entry wound above right clavicle,  
Large furrowed wound at exit

I have come to look upon peace and quiet  
And home life as all that is needed.  
I want is to be able to live quietly,  
Study a bit and tend a garden.

MOVE TO:

## **SCENE 16:**

[FORWARD HOSPITAL, FRANCE. FRANK SWANN IS WHEELED ON TO THE WARD. HE HAS HAD BOTH LEGS AMPUTATED AND HIS RIGHT ARM HAS ALSO LOST THE LOWER PART.

OVER THE TOP OF THE TOP OF THE EARLY PART OF THE SCENE WE HEAR THE DISTANT AND BLURRED VOICE OF THE HEAD SURGEON WHO PERFORMED FRANK'S AMPUTATIONS – ALMOST AS IF THIS IS THE INFORMATION THAT DRIFTED OVER FRANK AS HE FELL OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

SURGEON: We have here a shell explosion victim who has lain prone in the field for a number of hours and subsequently has lost a lot of blood. There are extensive and multiple injuries to the body including the complete severing of the right leg with acute damage to the arterial and posterial femoral cutaneous nerves, and compromise to the femoral artery. Gentleman, this will be an amputation to the hip.

[THE FOLLOWING ACTION THAT ACCOMPANIES THE LETTER-WRITING IS SELECTIVE AND STYLISED. THE PHYSICAL VOCABULARY IS ROLLING, STOPPING, TENSION AND RELIEF – IT FEELS LIKE ONE CONTINUOUS CIRCLE OF MOTION AS THE DAYS TURN INTO NIGHT, AND THE NIGHTS INTO DAYS.

IT IS NIGHT-TIME AND FRANK ROLLS OVER IN HIS BED IN PAIN AND SHOUTS OUT. HE IS GIVEN MORPHINE THROUGH A CANNULA BY ONE OF THE NURSES. HE RELAXES BACK INTO AN UNCOMFORTABLE SLEEP. ALONGSIDE, ANOTHER NURSE WRITES A LETTER FROM THE LOW LIGHT OF HER DESK]

### FRENCH FORWARD HOSPITAL: NIGHT INTO DAY

SURGEON: (voice-over) The left leg remains partially intact, though severed above the knee, and with a deep break to the femur, nerve damage is evident but the

saphenous vein is open. This will be a bilateral transfemoral amputation, but let us try and keep as long a residuum limb as possible, gentlemen. Clamp not cut if we possibly can.

WILLIAMSON: (writing) November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917. Dear Madam, your husband has asked me to answer a letter which he received from you the other day.

[IT IS DAYTIME AND FRANK TURNS IN BED AND SHOUTS OUT FOR THE NURSE. HE IS GIVEN MORPHINE THROUGH A CANNULA. HE RELAXES BACK INTO SLEEP]

SURGEON: (voice-over) There will need to be debridement to the right arm, and we may have to consider a guillotine amputation there – but let's cross that bridge when we come to it.

WILLIAMSON: (writing) He's coming along nicely, and is in hope of being home for Christmas. Where he will pay back with interest all those kisses you are longing for. He does not want you to send any money, for he does not think you can spare it, but thank you anyway.

[IT IS NIGHT-TIME AND FRANK ROLLS OVER IN BED IN PAIN. HE SHOUTS OUT FOR MORPHINE AND IS ADMINISTERED TO BY THE NURSE. HE THANKS HER.]

SURGEON: (voice-over) There is also damage to the costal wall, multiple rib fractures, extensive bruising, and scapula dislocation. Reggie – you can take that one.

WILLIAMSON: (writing) He's not in want of anything, and seems quite happy. In fact, he's the life of his section of the ward. We're all so pleased to know he's getting better, for we were very much worried about him at first.

[IT IS DAYTIME AND FRANK SITS UP IN BED AND SHOUTS OUT FOR THE SISTER TO BRING HIM MORPHINE. HE RECEIVES THE HIT OF MORPHINE, AND ALMOST LAUGHING, SINKS BACK INTO HIS BED]

SURGEON: (voice-over) Right, time to patch him up. Swig, anyone?

WILLIAMSON: (writing) Well, you don't lose both legs and most of your arm without some complications. He sends much love to the kiddy, but most of all for you. Yours sincerely, Sister Williamson. 13<sup>th</sup> General Hospital, France.

[IT IS NIGHT-TIME AND ANOTHER CASUALTY IS WHEELED ONTO THE WARD. HE ROLLS OVER IN HIS BED AND SHOUTS OUT IN PAIN. FRANK SWANN CALLS FOR THE NURSE TO ADMINISTER MORPHINE TO HIS FELLOW PATIENT. SISTER WILLIAMSON GOES TO HIS AID.]

ANTHONY: (writing) December, 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917. Dear Mrs. Swann, just a few lines to let you know your husband is improving in health each day, thanks to his endless supply of optimism and grit.

[THE NURSES CHANGE POSITIONS AND AS THEY DO, THE HOSPITAL BECOMES A LIGHTER AND LIVELIER ENVIRONMENT. IT IS POPULATED BY THE INJURED – BUT THESE ARE THE PEOPLE THAT WILL NOW LIVE. THERE ARE DOUBLE AMPUTEES, SINGLE AMPUTEES, THOSE WHO ARE PARALYSED AND THOSE WHO HAVE FACIAL INJURIES. FRANK SWANN BEGINS TO GET ABOUT IN A WHEELCHAIR.]

#### SECOND GENERAL HOSPITAL. DAY

ANTHONY: (writing) You already know he has been through a great deal, but through it all the thought of you and his little happy baby boy, before him, has been spurring him on. He speaks of you very often, and his one ambition is to go to Blighty to see the two he loves so much. He's receiving all your letters, and does not wish you to worry. As to when he will be able to go home, that is rather hard to answer, but I should say that it would be at least another month. He has a very good appetite, the appetite of a donkey in fact!

[ALL THE MEN BEGIN TO ROLL CIGARETTES. COMPLETING THE TASK BY USING EACH OTHER, CREATING A PRODUCTION LINE]

ANTHONY: (writing) It's quite amusing to watch him do things for himself with one hand. He takes pride in showing us his many accomplishments with his remaining good hand. He will get a cigarette, put in his mouth, open the box of matches and strike, and then after lighting his cigarette, place the ashtray on his chest, all with his left hand. We're all very fond of Swann. He's always bright and cheerful.

[THE PATIENTS IN THEIR BEDS, IN THEIR CHAIRS, MOUNTED ON THEIR STICKS BEGIN TO HUM, 'TAKE ME BACK TO DEAR OLD BLIGHTY' AS THE LETTER CONCLUDES.]

ANTHONY: (writing) The doctor is also very fond of him, and he is doing his best to get him to Blighty as soon as possible. Sincerely hope you and the baby are in good health, and if there is anything you would like me to do for your husband, please write to me, and I would be very glad to do it.

Sincerely yours, Sister Anthony, Second General Hospital, Boulogne, France.

[FRANK BEGINS TO SING 'TAKE ME BACK TO DEAR OLD BLIGHTY'. HE IS JOINED BY THE RANKS OF OTHER ARMY SOLDIERS LYING IN THEIR HOSPITAL BEDS. THE SINGING IS WRY BUT IMPASSIONED AND THE IMPERFECT CHOREOGRAPHY COMES TOGETHER IN AN ODD UNISON AS THE SONG BUILDS.]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE.

EDWARD: These letters, they're quite direct, aren't they, about the nature of his injuries. You might have the idea that they would tiptoe, but they don't ... they're just ... matter of fact, aren't they. Well, I suppose so many had come home in the same shape. And I also thought these letters must partly have been about preparing the ones back home for what ... what it was going to be like.

You know, he was always cheerful. I mean, when I think back, I thought if I'd been wounded, with both my legs off, I'd want to kill myself! (LAUGHS) Because you know, I've always been a keen walker, and the thought of having my legs off ... Oh dear! Erm ... yes ... I don't know how he managed it.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 17:**

[EVELYN ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE. THIS COULD BE RECORDED DELIVERY]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE.

EVELYN: My father didn't enjoy Army life very much. He writes ... he writes to my mother saying, that he hopes nobody else has to go through what he went through. Quite a few of the letters were blocked out. Censored. I think he ... he ... He talks about how much he misses the family. I think he ... he was very concerned that I wouldn't know who he was. He worried that the longer he was away, that I would have no memory of him, I wouldn't recognise him.

I was once very feverish, with probably just a sore throat and cold, sitting on my mother's knee, on that rocking chair, and the back door opened, and this soldier walked in, and I was sure it was my father. Whether it was ... I don't really believe in ghosts, but I remember saying to my mother ... "That's my daddy coming in", and she just ... she said I was delirious. Well, probably I was. And I still see it. Him in his Army uniform.

[A DOOR ON STAGE IS BLOWN OPEN. SOMEONE RUNS TO SHUT IT. SOMEONE ELSE THROWS IT OPEN. SOMEBODY ELSE SLAMS IT SHUT. SOMEBODY ELSE FALLS THROUGH IT. SOMEBODY ELSE CLOSES IT HURRIEDLY. MORE AND MORE PEOPLE CONTEST THE SPACE OF THE DOOR]

EVELYN: I'd ... I'd made up my mind he was missing, and one day he would walk in. I used to fantasise about it... one day, there'd be a knock at the door, and I thought I'd run to my mother and say, "My daddy's here!"

Even when I was quite adult I prayed it had been a mistake, and when my grandmother was coming to stay – his mother – I prayed to God to let him walk in while she was there. That he'd been shell-shocked, and he'd lost his memory, he

didn't know where he was, and he came home. I prayed so hard, I thought, "This is going to happen". And I believed it. (LAUGHS) And I remember somebody knocking at the door, when my grandmother was there, and I thought, "This is him!" And somebody came and said - "I've brought you some rhubarb! (LAUGHS) I always remember this wretched rhubarb! (LAUGHS) And I thought it was my father having lost his memory, and suddenly, finally, he remembered where he was.

I don't think he was killed immediately, you know, because on the letter... there was a letter saying that he'd been taken to a hospital and died through loss of blood with chest injuries. And it just said that he hadn't spoken, he'd left no messages, and hadn't spoken.

**MOVE TO:**

**SCENE 18:**

The Song of The Soldier Returning Home

NO doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—  
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed  
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—  
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud  
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...  
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

Siegfried Sassoon, *The Survivors*

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 19:**

[BRIAN IS STANDING OUTSIDE THE FRAME. HE ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY.]

BRIAN: He had ... erm ... other quirks. He ... he would come into the living room, look out of the window at the house opposite, which was some distance away, because you had two back gardens between them, and he was convinced that he was being watched, he was convinced that the woman in there was watching him -

[ON ANOTHER PART OF THE STAGE, ALBERT MULLARKEY IS LOOKING OUT OF THE WINDOW.]

KITCHEN. EARLY MORNING.

ALBERT: It is a vigil that I keep. I have to know what she is saying. I have to know what she is going to tell them. I see her open mouth ready to shout out secrets. We shouldn't have secrets from each other she says. I'm sorry, I say. The cups chink together, there is more wine. And I see her leaking out through the chinks in the walls and flooding along the streets and dripping through the drains. I see her thin blue fingers flutter across her forehead, putter pattern out clouds on the windowpane. She brings clouds of perfume onto my pillows. I see her shoulders shudder like the fields are dancing before harvest and her breastbone shines chalk white like a dead fish cleaned by the sea. And I am sorry, I say. I held those bones once and now I can no longer taste them. I held those fingers once, put them up under my coat to touch my chest, and now I can no longer feel my own heart beating. And I am so, so sorry. I left her under the mud. Cold in her blue body. I am told to dig. My spade slices through the mud and slices right through her wrist. I put her in the ground. I am told to dig faster. I kissed her and forgot to wake her up. I kissed her until she was dead, her hips slipping under sacking on the pile of wrecked people. Her hand is coming away at the seams, or so it seems. And I am sorry, I say to her. I am so very sorry. You will be, she replies. You will be sorry. You will be sorry you left me.

[THE SCENE RETURNS TO BRIAN]

BRIAN: And he'd stand there for hours ... because he thought she was watching him ... which was wrong. There was nobody watching him, nobody at all.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 20:**

[FRANCES'S MOTHER, RUTH ARMSTRONG TAKES OVER THE PIANO SEAT WITH FRANCES BESIDE HER – THEY SING THE BLUES STANDARD 'BABY WON'T YOU PLEASE COME HOME'. THERE IS A HUGE CLATTERING AS JACK ARMSTRONG ROLLS HOME. RUTH PROPELS FRANCES TO BED, WHICH FRANCES COMPLIES WITH AS PART OF THE ENTRAPMENT OF HER FATHER IN HIS GLAZED STATE.

**FRANCES RE-ENTERS AND CONSPICUOUSLY LISTENS TO THEIR CONVERSATION.** RUTH ARMSTRONG CONTINUES TO PLAY, SMILING SWEETLY AT JACK AS HE COMES INTO THE FRONT PARLOUR. HE RECOGNISES THE 'JOKE' OF THE SONG AND RETURNS THE MOCKERY WITH SOFTLY STAGED LAUGHTER. JACK FLOPS INTO THE ARMCHAIR. RUTH CONTINUES TO PLAY AS THE CONVERSATION BEGINS]

FRONT PARLOUR. LATE EVENING

JACK: Woman, we'll have no more of this late-night carousing.

RUTH: When the mood takes me, wild horses cannot stop me.

JACK: You'll get yourself even more of a reputation.

RUTH: Let them go hang. If I want to take my last shillings and spend them on beer and brandy, then who will refuse me?

JACK: There was no brandy.

RUTH: Ah, now that's a great pity.

JACK: You'll wake him up over the way with all your pounding on that piano.

RUTH: Lovely. I'll have someone who'll come and play with me.

JACK: And that's how you take your men nowadays is it? Hairy and wild?

RUTH: Mystical, that's how I like to think of him.

JACK: He's held together with bits of string.

RUTH: Was it the milk of human kindness you drank tonight?

JACK: She's like a shadow. Head down. Scuttling about.

RUTH: And that's what happens when you go looking out through your bad eye.

JACK: He's rubbed all the shine off her.

RUTH: And I'll do the same to you if you don't stop running your mouth off. Alice's got enough spirit for all of us.

JACK: He's always creeping up on you. You turn around and he's there, watching you.

RUTH: At least he doesn't look like *The Invisible Man*.

JACK: When the rest of us try so hard. Keeping things together.

RUTH: Luckily we have you as the standard bearer.

JACK: I had a duty to make sure that Frank got home in one piece -

RUTH: If he can get in the pub door, he can get out again.

JACK: He practically is only one piece, but I had to -

RUTH: St Jack -

JACK: That chair is like turning a tanker.

RUTH: - of the limbless and the legless.

JACK: We were rolling back down Elm Hill faster than I could push.

RUTH: You're not as strong as you would like to think you are.

JACK: Compared to most of them, I'm like bloody Achilles. And I could sweep you off your feet at the drop of a hat, or whatever you want to drop-

RUTH: He used to be such a... such a big man. He used to fill a room. Now I'm talking to him and he's right down there.

JACK: Don't knock it till you've tried it. He's fathered two children since he's been in that chair.

RUTH: I don't think I could.

JACK: And wouldn't you have touched me if I'd had lost a leg?

RUTH: With you it's different.

JACK: What if I get worse?

RUTH: You're not going to get any worse.

JACK: Don't you think his wife feels the same?

RUTH: She's more like his mother.

JACK: He made his sacrifice and now she has to make hers.

RUTH: It's not her duty to climb into bed with him.

JACK: Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

RUTH: She's been in the sanatorium twice now.

JACK: That was TB -

RUTH: Because she has had to take two jobs as well as-

JACK: What would like him to do, get on his bike and look for work?

RUTH: He could start by not drinking up his pension packet when they haven't got a pot to piss in.

JACK: A drink? You would begrudge that man a drink?

RUTH: But it's never *A* drink with you two is it?

JACK: Shrapnel worms its way around in my head, and you're getting all vinegary about a bloody drink.

RUTH: It's like, it's like I'm on the in-breath all the time.

JACK: I'm sorry that you have to look after me -

RUTH: Like I daren't breathe out.

JACK: I'm sorry you have look at my hideous face -

RUTH: It's like I'm waiting for it to catch up with you.

JACK: I'm sorry that I disappoint you.

RUTH: Because it still might take you. Because there is not a single thing that I can do to stop it.

JACK: Do you want the children to hear you?

RUTH: I didn't spend all that time watching the front door, heart like a fox, just to see you rot in front of me.

[PAUSE]

JACK: I'm going to be just fine.

RUTH: And that's just what you said when you left.

JACK: Yes. Yes, I did, didn't I?

RUTH: Yes you did. But I'm glad you came back. If just to prove yourself wrong.

JACK: I've always been a bit contrary like that.

RUTH: Laura Hickson. Rattling around in that house with all those ghosts. I can't bear to think about it.

JACK: I'm too tired to think about it.

RUTH: You'll be like a bear with a sore head in the morning.

JACK: A sense of humour is a very unattractive quality in a woman.

RUTH: It's the only thing that got me to marry you.

JACK: It was my shapely thighs on my bicycle.

RUTH: It was your beautiful eye.

[FRANCES TAKES OVER NARRATING THE SCENE]

FRANCES: He was in hospital a lot, after that. In and out of hospital, having the miracle “radium treatment”. So we got used to him being ill, but I honestly don’t think we even thought about his death. He was just always so, so present. I didn’t know he had cancer before he died. I just knew he had this big hole in his face.

Yes. I was disappointed ... absolutely racked with disappointment, because I wasn’t allowed to go to his funeral, and it was a funeral with full military honours. I wish I’d gone, because the church was packed. He was one of ten, and my mother was one of ten. There were masses of people outside, but I wasn’t allowed to go in. I was told the coffin had the Union Jack over it, and... and they played *The Last Post*. I wished they’d let me go... but they said I was too young.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 21:**

[EDWARD HAS ESCAPED TO THE PUB. HE TAKES LOVING SIPS AT HIS DARK BEER. THE REST OF THE COMPANY JOINS HIM FOR A QUIET DRINK.]

THE KING'S HEAD PUB. EARLY EVENING

EDWARD: I've stopped wearing the poppy. I don't stand at the cenotaph. I no longer rattle down Magdalene Street in the parade with the others. I leave my medals in their box. I've become a conscientious objector.

I remember my mother never really laughed very much. I remember she took down all the mirrors in the house. I remember yellowed bandages and sharing trousers with my father. He wore the top half, and I wore the bottom. I remember there was a group of us. We were all in the same boat.

I don't think people should do military service. I don't think they should be barked at and bullied, and I don't think they should come home blown to bits and still be expected to give a cheery wave of their new titanium limb. I don't think war is good for you, or character building, or a duty or a sacrifice for Queen and country.

We couldn't have understood more deeply what sacrifice was. His injured body was something we always carried. He was impounded in his own body. He resented his injured body, and his injured body resented the rest of us. It took him 20 years to die.

We just accepted that we were at war. We just accepted that it was our place to go to war. We just accepted that it was the working classes that were getting killed. Many of them didn't even have the right to vote. Farmers. Joiners. Bakers. Delivery boys. I just accepted that my life wouldn't be any different. I just accepted that was my lot. I never tried for anything out of my reach.

We spent too long being spoken for by politicians and jingoist poets. We spent too long keeping a stiff upper lip. We spent too long not talking about it. We spent too

long not talking to each other. Me and my dad. I spent too long trying to prove myself to him. Even after he died. I wish I could have told him none of that matters.

My father wanted me to fight. Perhaps I should thank him. My mother taught me to protect myself. Perhaps I should thank her. But it's got some good in ... in it, I suppose, in the sense that it learns you ... you learn to look after yourself.

**MOVE TO:**

**SCENE 22:**

[EVELYN ENTERS AND ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE DIRECTLY]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE.

EVELYN: I was ashamed of her sometimes – it’s an awful thing to say – but she ... I had the best of everything, with the help of her parents ... the very best quality of everything, lovely toys and I didn’t suffer at all. But my mother used to look a bit shabby, I used to think. I was in town once with my aunt – my mother’s younger sister - who was always well-dressed, and I met some of my school friends, and on the Monday, they said, “Oh! Isn’t your mother lovely! Doesn’t she look nice!” And that was my aunt. I didn’t let on. I said, “Oh, do you think so?” And I just let it pass. And forever after that, I was so afraid of them seeing me with my mother, looking so ... shabby, She bought good clothes, but they had to last, and ... and I’m ashamed of that, ashamed that I denied my own mother.

[EVELYN STEPS INTO THE FRAME AND THE SCENE GROWS AROUND HER. KATHLEEN SWANN (MOTHER TO EDWARD), ALICE MULLARKEY (MOTHER TO BRIAN) AND RUTH ARMSTRONG (MOTHER TO FRANCES) ARE ALL AT LAURA HICKSON’S (MOTHER TO EVELYN) HOUSE. THEY ARE STRIPPING A BEDROOM AND PACKING BELONGINGS INTO BAGS AND SUITCASES. EVELYN LOITERS AROUND THE EDGES OF THE WORK. THEY TALK OVER HER AS IF SHE WAS MORE CHILD THAN SHE IS. THE DIALOGUE IS RAPID, OVERLAPPING AND WORK-BASED]

GUEST BEDROOM. LATE AFTERNOON.

ALICE: Well, I think it’s a fair offer.

RUTH: A fair offer? You make it sound like she’s selling a wash-stand.

KATHLEEN: He’s got a motorcycle, you know.

LAURA: He could have a Rolls Royce for all the good it would do him.

KATHLEEN: And he's got the shop.

RUTH: She doesn't want to be smelling horse-glue and varnish all day.

KATHLEEN: If it'd keep me in perfume all year, it's a trade I'd happily make.

ALICE: He's a nice enough chap, Laura. Decent. He'd see you right.

RUTH: He doesn't own that house, you know.

KATHLEEN: Whose is it then?

RUTH: Belongs to the dead wife's family. He's still living there with the children.

ALICE: One child. He's got one little girl, must be about the same age as your Evelyn.

LAURA: Subtlety was never your strong point, Alice.

ALICE: I'm just saying, he'd do a good job of looking after you all.

LAURA: And I'm saying, I've already turned him down. So, this is all a lot of fuss about nothing.

KATHLEEN: And you know he would still snatch your hand off if you offered it to him.

LAURA: I'm really sorry I 'confided' in you now.

KATHLEEN: I've seen the way he mopes around after you with those big cow eyes.

ALICE: I think he's got a lovely face. A kind face.

RUTH: He's certainly acquired a lot of teeth from somewhere. They're like tombstones. Imagine those teeth looming towards you in bed.

LAURA: I'm glad this is affording you all so much amusement.

RUTH: The moonlight glinting off them as he nibbled at your neck.

KATHLEEN: Last week I find you crying in the street, in the street, because you've no money in the bank, and this week a perfectly nice man, with a perfectly nice life and a perfectly nice wage asks you to marry him, and you're turning him down.

LAURA: Of course I am.

RUTH: Of course she is.

KATHLEEN: When does she get to be so choosy? We've all had to cut our cloth. And yours is becoming paper-thin Laura Hickson.

LAURA: Where does it get me to be dolled up to the nines?

RUTH: I don't think I'd ever marry again either.

ALICE: You only lost your Jack a year ago? None of us can say what's going to happen anymore.

KATHLEEN: She's been on her own ten, ten, eleven years now.

RUTH: But it's different for her, she lost Henry when he was in his prime, when he was still young and beautiful, before they were both brought down by life.

ALICE: It's the chance at a new life, a fresh start.

LAURA: I don't want a fresh start, thank you.

KATHLEEN: What I wouldn't give for another go round.

LAURA: Why don't you marry him then?

KATHLEEN: What, and smell of horse glue?

RUTH: And have those big teeth knocking into yours as you kissed.

ALICE: He does look like an electrocuted rabbit.

LAURA: And you were all doing such a good job of persuading me.

KATHLEEN: I was just hoping for the party. We could do with something to cheer us all up.

[OUTSIDE THE HOUSE, THE LODGER, MAURICE PARKER RETURNS AND IS WILD WITH ANGER TO FIND ALL HIS POSSESSIONS OUT ON THE PAVEMENT.]

MAURICE: Why are all my things on the street? What? What's all this stuff doing here? Laura? Laura? What's going on?

KATHLEEN: Ladies. Are we ready to go over the top?

RUTH: (shouting to Maurice) Mr Parker. I think you'll find all of your items ready for you to collect.

MAURICE: Who are you? Who the hell are you? Where is Laura? I want to speak to Laura? Did you put my things out on the street?

RUTH: I did Mr Parker. You'll need to find somewhere else to sleep tonight.

KATHLEEN: And the nights after that, you dirty bastard.

LAURA: (to the interior) Don't! I don't want a big drama on my doorstep.

KATHLEEN: (to LAURA) That's exactly what we do want.

MAURICE: You've got no right to do this. You can't do this.

RUTH: And you had no right to enter a woman's bedroom in the middle of the night and try to -

MAURICE: What? Come on -

RUTH: Leaving her terrified and frightened for her life.

KATHLEEN: Just because you're paying for board, doesn't mean you're paying for anything else.

MAURICE: Laura? Laura! What, are you trying to make out that you didn't try to drag me into your bed? She's a lonely lady.

KATHLEEN: Bugger off and don't come back you dirty little pervert.

MAURICE: As if I'd touch that ugly, saggy old witch. I'm not desperate enough to go grave-robbing.

RUTH: Away with you, before we call the men.

MAURICE: There ain't no men around here, sweetheart. You've no real men. Just bits of men.

[ALICE TAKES A BOWL OF WATER AND THROWS IT AT MAURICE THROUGH THE WINDOW]

KATHLEEN: (ducking) Jesus, woman, will you warn me before you're going to do that?

MAURICE: Bloody hell woman! You're as mad as your old man. You're all bloody mad.

ALICE: Yes, I am. I am mad, and you'd better make sure you keep watching over your shoulder for me.

MAURICE: I'll fetch the constable on you.

RUTH: No you won't.

KATHLEEN: Go on, go. Yes, start running.

[BACK TO THE INTERIOR. ALICE BUSIES HERSELF AS THE OTHER LADIES STAND LOOKING AT HER.]

ALICE: I could do with a cup of tea after that.

KATHLEEN: That wasn't just water you threw at him was it?

ALICE: Well. He was asking for it.

RUTH: You emptied the chamber pot on him?

ALICE: It was his own piss. He can take it back with him.

LAURA: I would say 'thank you' but I'm going to wait to see if we all end up spending the night in the police station.

KATHLEEN: Frankly, it would be a nice rest. And here's 15 shillings for your trouble.

LAURA: Did you take this? Did you take this from his case?

RUTH: Of course we did.

[EVELYN SERVES A CUP OF TEA TO ALL THE WOMEN WHICH THEY ENJOY WITH THE LAUGHTER OF ADRENALINE. EVELYN MOVES OUTSIDE THE FRAME AND SPEAKS DIRECTLY TO THE AUDIENCE]

HERE. IN THE THEATRE

EVELYN: She didn't remarry. His name was Ralph. He used to mend our shoes, and he started coming to see her, and in the end, she wouldn't go to the door. But never ... there was never any love or anything between them – not on her side. No. No, she didn't want to have anything to do with him really. I'd have been pleased, because ... because I think his wife was dead, and he'd got a little girl, and I thought it would be rather nice to have him as a father ... and have a sister. I always wished I'd got a sister or brother to share it, but my mother discouraged him, so it was always just the two of us.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 23:**

[FRANCES ENTERS WITH A PACKAGE OF GROCERIES AND HANDS THEN TO EDWARD. THEY ARE ALL DRESSED IN THEIR EVENING CLOTHES, SCRUBBED AND BUFFED AFTER WORK. THERE IS COMFORTABLE FAMILIARITY, GOOD HUMOUR AND MUCH UNSPOKEN. THEY ARE NOW AROUND 18 YEARS OLD.]

MARKET SQUARE. SUMMER'S EVENING.

FRANCES: Here you go.

EDWARD: What do I want these for?

FRANCES: They're for your mum, well your dad, really.

EDWARD: As long as they're not for me.

FRANCES: I have nothing left to give you. Do they know when he'll come out?

EDWARD: If he comes out, it'll just be to be at home.

FRANCES: How long do they reckon?

EDWARD: Who knows, who knows.

FRANCES: Are you going while he's still in hospital?

EDWARD: I've got to. I'd go even if I had the choice to stay.

FRANCES: I don't know why you expect him to be any different.

EDWARD: I don't anymore.

FRANCES: Do we get to see you all in your blues then?

EDWARD: Not until we've done the training.

FRANCES: Where will you be stationed?

EDWARD: Boston.

FRANCES: Watch out, they're funny round there. All the girls have webbed fingers.

EDWARD: Maybe you could come visit me? You could get Ray to drive you.

FRANCES: It is a nice car, though.

EDWARD: It is a nice car.

[BRIAN ENTERS IN A HURRY.]

BRIAN: Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

EDWARD: We were going without you. Seeing as you couldn't be bothered to turn up on time.

FRANCES: Ignore him. Evelyn's not even here yet.

BRIAN: Why do I never learn?

EDWARD: Cat up a tree again today?

BRIAN: Barge fire at Brundall.

[EVELYN ENTERS AT A LANGUID PACE AND JOINS THE GROUP]

EVELYN: You do live the high life.

BRIAN: You'll be getting a taste of all this soon.

FRANCES: At last.

EVELYN: What? Did I keep you from selling your cabbages and toothpaste?

FRANCES: Look. I had to fire someone today.

EDWARD: I bet you bloody loved that.

FRANCES: I did.

BRIAN: Vampires, the pair of you. Poor sod.

FRANCES: He was taking ham home in his pockets.

BRIAN: He deserves everything he gets.

EVELYN: Why isn't this more about me?

EDWARD: We can't confront the misery of losing you.

FRANCES: We have to pretend it isn't happening.

BRIAN: Inside we're weeping.

EVELYN: Bugger off. The lot of you. I won't miss you at all.

FRANCES: You're not going away forever.

EVELYN: Liverpool's practically on the moon.

FRANCES: You'll come back to see your mum.

BRIAN: You'll come back to see us.

EVELYN: I might not.

EDWARD: She'll be too busy being the Lady of the Lamp. Mopping fevered brows.

BRIAN: Too busy wiping arses.

EVELYN: And you'll be too busy flying your planes.

BRIAN: He's not going to be flying anything you daft mare.

FRANCES: He's RAF Regiment, Evie, he'll be on the ground.

EVELYN: What's the point of that?

EDWARD: One less for you to patch up.

EVELYN: I'm staying away from it all. I'm nursing children.

FRANCES: Your mum was right to make you.

EVELYN: Yes. I've had quite enough of seeing wounded men about the place to last me a lifetime.

BRIAN: So you don't think this one is going to be like the last one?

FRANCES: How could it be? How could anything be as horrid?

BRIAN: I don't think anyone's got the appetite for it.

EVELYN: At least with Edward safely out the way, we stand a good chance of winning.

EDWARD: And there goes that port and black I was going to buy you.

EVELYN: Did I tell you you'll be the one I'll miss the most.

BRIAN: I'll buy. But just as long as there's no bloody crying.

FRANCES: The cheek. You had tears rolling down your face a fortnight ago.

BRIAN: That was my brother!

EDWARD: And the ale.

EVELYN: And am I not like a sister to you?

BRIAN: I got the family looks then.

FRANCES: Feels like everyone's on the move.

EDWARD: Bit tiring, of all these goodbye dos.

BRIAN: Heavy on the wallet too.

FRANCES: Your John in January, then Bernie a couple of weeks ago, Jeff across the way, he's gone into the Army.

EDWARD: And then they all come back again.

[THEY START TO SLOWLY EXIT, ON THEIR WAY TO THE PUB]

FRANCES: True.

EDWARD: And you're saying 'hello' again, as soon as you've said 'goodbye'.

EVELYN: Well, I'll be glad to see the back of the lot of you.

[BRIAN ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE]

BRIAN: But they didn't come back. John's aircraft was shot down very early on in the war. Bernard joined the Navy, and on his first trip was across to America to pick up a new frigate, and ... er ... it was torpedoed and sunk in the Bay of Biscay.

[EDWARD IS LEFT, HE ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE, THEN LEAVES]

EDWARD: I have a guilty feeling that I never really got involved in any serious fighting. I have a guilty feeling about that. But ... erm ... you know, it's just chance, isn't it. I mean, plenty of my Regiment did get killed. But ... er ... you know, I just seemed to always be on the side of the angels.

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 24:**

[BRIAN MULLARKEY (28) WAITS AT THE CHURCH ALTAR FOR HIS FUTURE WIFE TO PROCESS DOWN THE AISLE. THE BRIDE ENTERS THE CHURCH AND BRIAN TURNS AROUND TO SEE HER – AS HE DOES SO HE CATCHES SIGHT OF HIS FATHER, ALBERT MULLARKEY WHO IS STANDING AMONGST THE GRAVESTONES AND CROSSES A LITTLE WAY OFF.

BRIAN ADDRESSES US DIRECTLY AS THE STAGE ACTION CONTINUES MARKING THE RITUALS OF THE WEDDING. WE HEAR SOFT ECHOES AS THE VICAR CONDUCTS THE CEREMONY. THEY EXCHANGE RINGS]

CHURCH INTERIOR. SUMMER'S MORNING.

VICAR: In the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we have come together to witness the marriage of Brian and Helen, to pray for God's blessing on them, to share their joy and to celebrate their love.

BRIAN: And, of course, the big regret, now, is that I feel that I could have engaged with my father, but it was my older siblings that would have had the better chance, because he wasn't ... he wouldn't have deteriorated so much by the time he could have a conversation with them, but with me it was very difficult.

VICAR: It is given as the foundation of family life in which children are born and nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort.

BRIAN: We don't have a photograph of her or my father before they were married ... no records, nothing. When he became ill, I'm told that Mother decided that the past was the past and should be put behind them, and they must make the best of what they've got. So Mother destroyed everything, everything of their life together before the war.

VICAR: Brian, will you take Helen to be your wife? Will you love her, comfort her, honour and protect her, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?

BRIAN: There was never any arguments or that sort of thing. They had a very good relationship. She would do anything for him. I think she truly loved him, and in his better moments, I'm sure he would say the same.

VICAR: Will you, the families and friends of Brian and Helen, support and uphold them in their marriage now and in the years to come?

CONGREGATION: We will.

BRIAN: I should be pleased. He came down to the church. He didn't come into the church; he stood outside, and watched us when we came out. It wasn't that he wasn't invited. There was just never a question of him coming inside with the rest of us.

VICAR: Now, please join me in singing hymn number 457 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus'

[THE CONGREGATION SHUFFLES ITSELF INTO ORDER AND BEGINS TO SING. ALBERT IS STANDING OUTSIDE THE CHURCH. THE HYMN SWELLS AND THEN SOFTENS AS HE BEGINS TO SING 'WHEN THIS LOUSY WAR IS OVER'. HIS VOICE IS NOW ALONE. THE STAGE IS DARKNESS AROUND HIM. AS HIS VOICE CRACKS, IT CROSSES TO FINE, HIGH SOPRANO VOICE.]

MOVE TO:

**SCENE 25:**

[THE STAGE IS IN DARKNESS. WE HEAR EVELYN'S VOICE – THE REAL EVELYN (WINNIE SPRAY) RECORDED]

EVELYN/WINNIE: I remember my mother going out. We lived at the top of a hill, and I remember walking down this hill, the grassy banks on each side of it, and we'd gone to meet a soldier. I don't ... I don't know... I think it could have been my father. And my mother let go of my hand – I'd be two and a half – to let me run to meet him. And he picked me up, and put me on his shoulder. I was two and half when my father died. And that's the only memory I have.

END.

My dearest Kathleen,

Just a few lines to let you know that I am near back to normal today.

My knees are cut up a bit but not as much as the Huns got hung up in our barbed wire. It was a terrible sight that I shall never forget as long as I live.

Before we went over, a party of our chaps sent over smoke bombs, so as to stop the enemy from seeing us, we had strict orders not to take prisoners, so my first job was to empty my magazine on 3 Germans who came out of their dugouts bleeding badly and put them out of their misery. They cried for mercy, but I had my orders, they had no feeling for us poor chaps.

Soon after one of our Majors came up to me to ask for a report and no sooner had he finished his sentence, a sniper caught him clean through the throat and he was dead in less than five minutes. There was then heavy shelling and we had to leave our position soon after, and of course, had to leave his body for the Huns to bury. He had only been out in France for 2 months. I don't think I need say anymore for the present as it makes my head jump to think of it.