

Never the twain

Second Edition

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{slightly revised and converted to Word 6 format : 1997}
{Reconverted and saved in pdf mode 2003}

Dramatis Personae

Carol	A housewife : Late 30s to early 50s
Brian	A civil servant : Carol's husband - similar age to Carol or a little older
John	A man : Any age below 50
Vincent	A shopkeeper : Any age
Karen	A young woman
Linda	A young woman similar age to Karen
Harry	Linda's husband
Peter	A shop worker : younger than Brian

Scene ** 1 : A lost soul

[*Carol Smith is sitting reading a book. Brian is sitting reading the F.T.
Carol looks up - when she talks it is with a wistful far-away voice*]

Carol: Never the twain shall meet - sad sort of expression really isn't it ?
Brian: Is it darling ?
Carol: Yes Brian, it is. I sometimes wonder if you have a soul at all.
Brian: Do you darling - I sometimes wonder that myself.
Carol: I'm sure you had one when you married me, but it just seems to have sort-of slipped away.
Brian: I know what you mean Carol, I remember when we first met - I definitely had one then - a soul that is - and I remember this funny little feeling I had in my stomach whenever I saw you.
Carol: Don't you get it now - the funny little feeling ?
Brian: No, my doctor gave me something for it and it went away.
Carol: Pity really
Brian: I suppose it is - in a way - but then don't you think a soul might get in the way a bit ?
Carol: In the way of what ?
Brian: Logical decisions.
Carol: Well I suppose it might, but I've never really put much store by logical decisions. I'd rather jump to a conclusion any day.
Brian: I remember when I used to jump to conclusions - I think I stopped doing that about the time the funny little feeling disappeared.
Carol: I think that's sad.
Brian: That's because you've got a soul - I can't remember the last time I was sad - I mean I've regretted things - but I can't say that I've actually been sad for quite a good while.
Carol: It's a pity you can't be sad. It's rather nice being sad - as long as it doesn't happen too often.
Brian: I can't even remember what it's like to be sad.
Carol: Well it's like having a lump -
Brian: In your throat ?
Carol: Yes - or your stomach
Brian: I can't say as I'd want to have a lump in my stomach - the funny little feeling was bad enough without having a fully grown lump.
Carol: It's only *like* a lump - It's not a fully fledged bulge - Just like a bubble.
Brian: I thought that was wind.
Carol: I might as well give up really - Don't you feel any emotions ?
Brian: { *thinks* } Annoyance.

Carol: I'm not sure that that qualifies as an emotion - and even if it does, what a one to keep - How can you get rid of Love, Sadness, Sympathy and keep Annoyance ? - It's like throwing away a Royal Flush to keep the 10.

Brian: {*Irritably*} And you know I don't share your passion for poker.

Carol: Yes, you've certainly kept Annoyance. Oh, talking of which, did you sort out that problem with the library books ?

Brian: Please Carol, don't ever mention the words "library book" in my presence again, it was a nightmare.

Carol: But what I can't understand is what overdue library books have to do with the Transport Police anyway.

Brian: After two hours of banal questioning I haven't either. I've never seen so many books. Hundreds of them, all taken out in the name of Brian Smith at this address.

Carol: Are you sure you didn't take them out, and just forgot to return them ?

Brian: What ?? You know I only read the Financial Times. What on earth would I want with - amongst others - "The history of Morris Dancing" or "The problem with Porcupines" ?

Carol: So what are they going to do about it ?

Brian: Oh, eventually they called in a graphologist who exonerated me unequivocally.

Carol: Oh that's good. {*Gently laughing*} It's always best to be unequivocally exonerated - sets you up for the rest of the day really. I still think it's very strange though.

Brian: Strange ? Infuriating, that's what I call it.

Carol: Well, it's all come out alright. I think it's rather funny.

Brian: Funny ?! You're incomprehensible at times. You think everything's funny - you even think my job's funny, and a less funny thing than my job is hard to imagine.

Carol: You could be public executioner, I wouldn't think that was funny.

Brian: I'm sure you'd find something to giggle at, my black hood for instance -

Carol: You haven't got a black hood -

Brian: I know I haven't got a black hood - that's because I'm not the public executioner, but I'd have one if I was, wouldn't I ?

Carol: Yes I suppose you would. Perhaps it's as well that you work for the ministry of whatever-it-is after all.

Brian: Yes, well the ministry of whatever-it-is, as you call it, is awaiting my presence at this very moment, so I'd better be off.

Carol: Anything interesting, darling - at work ?

Brian: Interviewing again. A Mr. Grey this time. Probably a waste of time - Can't even fill in his name properly.

Carol: {*Laughs*} I think I'd probably like Mr. Grey. Anyone who can't fill in one of your questionnaires immediately appeals to me, a kindred spirit.

Brian: I find I understand you less and less -

Carol: I should go and have a look for your soul if I were you - I'm sure you've only mislaid it - I don't think it's truly lost.

[*Lights fade*]

Scene ** 2 : The Ministry of Whatever-it-is

[Lights rise]

[Brian is sitting at his desk, There is a knock at the door.]

Brian: Come in

[John Grey enters]

Brian: Ah, hello Mr. Grey - I trust you're well ?

John: No

Brian: Good - now, we asked for your full name on this form, and you've put John C. Grey.

John: That is correct - that is my name.

Brian: The "C.", Mr Grey - what does it stand for ?

John: Oh. - Guess -

Brian: Coelacanth ?

John: Correct -

Brian: Unusual name.

John: Yes, my father was an ichthyologist - strange you should have guessed it so quickly.

Brian: Interesting creature the coelacanth, I stuffed one once.

John: It's a small world.

Brian: Is he dead ?

John: Oh I should think so.

Brian: Don't you know ?

John: Well to be honest, I don't really care.

Brian: That's rather a peculiar attitude - did you not get on with him ?

John: I never met him.

Brian: You never met your father ?

John: Oh I see. I thought you were asking after the well-being of the coelacanth after whom I was named. My father, oh no, he's not dead, why should you think that he was dead ?

Brian: Because you said WAS an ichthyologist - past tense you see.

John: Oh no, he's still very much alive - he's just not an ichthyologist anymore.

Brian: Why not ?

John: Couldn't spell it.

Brian: As good a reason as any to abandon a profession. What does he do now ?

John: He's foreign secretary.

Brian: Really ?!

John: No, only kidding, he's a mosquito farmer.

Brian: In Burkina Faso ?

John: Yes - Ouagadougou.

Brian: Um, I believe there is quite a demand for mosquito farmers in the upper reaches of the Volta.

John: Yes, originally he was going to breed Tsetse flies, but again he had problems with the spelling.

Brian: I trust this inability to spell is not hereditary.

John: Oh no I can spell very well indeed - in fact my father and I nearly went into partnership.

Brian: Him doing the work and you doing the spelling ?

John: Just so. But then he discovered a parasite that he *could* spell and didn't need my services.

Brian: And that's why you're here, I suppose.

John: It seemed like a good idea.

Brian: Well Mr. Coelacanth ...

John: Grey -

Brian: Sorry, Mr Grey

John: I shouldn't imagine anyone's called Mr. Coelacanth. I mean as a middle name it's rare, as a surname I should think it's extinct.

Brian: But that's what they said about the coelacanth itself ...

John: Good point.

Brian: After all, I discovered only recently that old Terry Dactyl in Marketing, was thought extinct until he was noticed breathing.

John: And flapping his wings no doubt -

Brian: I'm sorry ?

John: Never mind. What are my prospects ?

Brian: Jolly good, I'd say - you'll have to answer the standard questions of course.

John: Naturally.

Brian: Well let's make a start shall we ?

John: No time like the present -

Brian: Good - Please answer the following "Yes" or "No":
Are you, or have you ever been, a Tibetan monk ?

John: No.

Brian: A Tamil Tiger ?

John: No.

Brian: An ambassador to the United Nations for a country other than our own ?

John: No.

Brian: A mosquito farmer ?

John: Very nearly, but not quite.

Brian: Just answer "Yes" or "No", please Mr. Grey.

John: No.

Brian: What ? You're refusing to answer "Yes" or "No" ?

John: No. I was answering "No" to the mosquito farming question.

Brian: Ah, I see, good - Have you ever captained a boat in excess of one hundred thousand tons, in British waters under a flag of convenience ?

John: No.

Brian: Have you - or your mother - ever been bitten by any of the following ?

- A hamster ?

John: No.

Brian: - A giraffe ?

John: No.

Brian: - A lobster ?

John: Ah.

Brian: Ah ?

John: Well not bitten, nipped. I believe my mother was nipped by a lobster whilst I was still quite a small child.

Brian: The question clearly says “bitten” Mr. Grey, no mention of nipping.

John: I wasn’t aware that lobsters could bite, so I assumed nipping was the surrogate offence, so to speak.

Brian: You assumed wrongly, Mr. Grey. Can we take this answer therefore to be a “No” ?

John: Indeed you can -

Brian: Good, well that concludes the “Yes / No” section. All we need now is for you to answer the following, as quickly as possible, without hesitation, repetition or deviation.

John: Do I have a minute in which to do this ?

Brian: I said as quickly as possible Mr. Grey. -

John: Right.

Brian: What is the capital of The Cameroons ?

John: Yaoundé

Brian: Who wrote “Ode to a skylark” ?

John: Percy Byshe Shelley.

Brian: How many square inches in a square mile ?

John: Well it’s 63,360 squared.

Brian: Well come on Mr. Grey. - Quickly -

John: What ?

Brian: Square it -

John: Good grief - um - Four thousand and fourteen million, four hundred and eighty nine thousand, six hundred.

Brian: Very good Mr. Grey - Very good indeed !

John: Yes - I was quite impressed myself.

Brian: With what ?

John: Er - My mental arithmetic.

Brian: Not at all Mr. Grey. The minor feat of mental arithmetic pales into insignificance compared to the way in which you said the number.

John: Oh ?

Brian: Yes, all these other questions were as nothing compared to the importance of the way you expressed that number.

John: I don’t follow -

Brian: Is that the way you always say that number ?

John: I’m not aware that I’ve ever come across it before.

Brian: Better and better - you see you’re a *natural*.

John: A natural what ?

Brian: A natural Anglonumerologist.
John: Am I ?
Brian: Indeed. You see, you said four thousand and fourteen million, not four billion and fourteen million.
John: Oh.
Brian: Sticking to the good old British billion rather than the pansy little American billion which has so vulgarly insinuated itself into the popular vocabulary.
John: Absolutely.
Brian: Well - I'm not at liberty to tell you whether or not you have passed, but if we were it, I'd go....
John: I'm sorry "We were it" ?
Brian: Ah, did I say that, I must apologise, I occasionally have problems with my first and second person singular.
John: An unusual malady.
Brian: Indeed. What I meant to say was - if *I* were *you*, I'd go out and buy a bottle of Bollinger, if you follow my meaning.
John: Indeed I do. - 1965 ?
Brian: The very year.
John: Excellent.

[*Lights fade*]

Scene ** 3 : A Very Good Year

[*Lights Rise*]

[*Mr. Vincent Verwood is standing at the counter of his wine shop,
John Grey enters*]

John: I should like to purchase a bottle of Bollinger champagne.
Vince: Very good sir, any particular vintage ?
John: Oh very much so. 1965.
Vince: 1965 eh. I remember 1965.
John: So do I.
Vince: An excellent year - if you don't mind me saying -
John: Not at all, I thought it an excellent year also -
Vince: September particularly -
John: Oh yes, September '65 - what a month
Vince: It had thirty days, I seem to recall
John: The very number.
Vince: Thursday.
John: Thursday ?
Vince: The last day of September '65 - It was a Thursday -
John: Indeed it was. Whereas the first was a Wednesday.
Vince: Well it would be. It was the sort of year where the first of September just had to fall on a Wednesday.
John: I couldn't agree more - As the year started, I remember saying to myself "I bet the first of September's going to fall on a Wednesday this year" I could just feel it in my bones.
Vince: It's funny you know, young people today, they have no respect for the first of September at all. Time was when it was driven into a kids skull from their first day at primary school. "Remember, remember the first of September"
John: "And pray that the season is hot" - it all comes flooding back. Don't they teach kids that anymore ?
Vince: I believe there is provision for it in the National Curriculum, along with the three "R"s
John: Reading, Riting and Rithmetic.
{*Vincent mouths "Reading, Writing, Arithmetic" slowly*}
Vince: Yes, I think they ought to include spelling as well really.
John: Absolutely - that was my father's problem. Blighted his career it did.
Vince: How sad. I knew a fellow once, couldn't even spell his own profession.
John: He didn't become a Mosquito farmer by any chance, did he ?
Vince: Well knock me down with a leaf of spinach - that's exactly what he did.
John: I wonder if he knew my father.
Vince: I wonder. - Did many people know your father ?
John: Oh yes, quite a few. In fact I'm sure several of them still do.

Vince: {*Surprised*} Oh, he's still alive then -

John: Why does everybody assume that my father is dead - I'm not that old after all.

Vince: It's your use of the past tense, it can be very misleading.

John: I'm sure I was employing the past continuous, suggesting a certain futurity within the context of a semi-historical statement.

Vince: That's as maybe, but without the footnote, it can still be quite misleading.

John: I suppose it could be, I will have to watch out for that in future, I don't like to be misunderstood.

Vince: Who does ? And anyway, I don't want to split hairs, but you definitely used the past historic, though I'm sure it was only a slip of the tongue.

John: Did I really - well I most sincerely apologise. That's the second time today I've been misinterpreted as to the tense in which I phrased my discourse.

Vince: I'm sure it's only a passing phase, I had a problem with possessive pronouns a couple of months ago, but I soon got over it, thanks to Harris's Guide to English Grammar and Syntax, Third edition with the enlarged glossary.

John: Oh really, it has an enlarged glossary, the third edition, does it ? I'm still labouring under the wholly inadequate first edition.

Vince: Oh no, even the second edition missed the mark somewhat, I really do recommend the third.

Brian: I will purchase one immediately upon departing from your emporium.

Vince: Most wise sir. Then of course there was 1971.

John: I'm sorry ?

Vince: 1971 - That was the next time the first of September fell on a Wednesday.

John: Good Lord, so it was. And of course Nijinsky went and won the triple crown.

Vince: To be expected - though I thought that was 1970.

John: Maybe so - I can't say as '71 matched up to '65

Vince: I'd have to agree - wonderful year '65

John: Of course Winston Churchill probably didn't think so.

Vince: Well no he wouldn't - but if you've got to die, I don't think you could pick a better year than 1965.

John: All things considered, I think you're probably right. I'm very hopeful about 1999, September the first falls on a Wednesday then too.

Vince: Does it really - well I never did.

John: Augurs well for the new millennium, wouldn't you say.

Vince: Indeed I would. Makes you feel like Nostradamus was probably wrong -

John: I sincerely hope so

Vince: You and five billion other people.

John: {*slightly shocked*} What was that you said

Vince: You and five billion other people - hope the world won't end in 1999.

John: **BILLION !!** I am afraid I cannot possibly purchase wine from this establishment - Good day !

[*John. Exits*] [*Vincent looks bemused*]

[*Lights remain on - there is only a small pause to the next scene*]

Scene ** 4 : Revelations

[*Karen Forsythe enters*][*Vincent is still behind counter*]

Karen: Hello Vincent
Vince: Nice to see you Karen -
Karen: You look a little perplexed -
Vince: I am not a little perplexed - I am very perplexed.
Karen: Oh ? Anything interesting ?
Vince: Peculiar rather than interesting -
Karen: Not the end of the world then.
Vince: Funny you should say that -
Karen: If it's anything about the end of the world, I don't want to know. I've spent all morning trying to get rid of a Jehovah's Witness.
Vince: Very well. Consider the matter closed.
Karen: I'm glad to hear it. Care for a Bible ?
Vince: Don't mind if I do. - Haven't read a good Bible in ages.
Karen: You can keep it, it's a spare -
Vince: That's very kind of you. - Why is it spare ?
Karen: The Jehovah's Witness had a special offer on - Buy six Bibles get one free. I think the six should keep me busy enough.
Vince: I'd avoid the Revelations of St. John the Divine for a while if I were you, rather a lot of gnashing of teeth etcetera.
Karen: Well quite; I thought if I went through in order then it'd be quite a while before I got to the Apocalypse.
Vince: Indeed. I must admit I tend to dip in here and there, rather than going for the full cover-to-cover treatment. You know, bit of Leviticus here, spot of Corinthians there and finish off with a dollop of Judges or Kings.
Karen: Or a nice psalm.
Vince: Exactly. - Nothing like a good psalm.
Karen: Nothing - Except another good psalm.
Vince: Well precisely, but you *can* overdo it - a surfeit of psalms never did anyone any good - I remember an old friend of mine.....
Karen: Do I know him ?
Vince: I doubt it - he's a mosquito farmer in Upper Volta - haven't seen him since his son was born - mind-you he was an ichthyologist then
Karen: Really - how interesting.
Vince: Yes - specialised in coelacanth
Karen: Fascinating - there's nothing like a good coelacanth -
Vince: Nothing - except another good coelacanth.
Karen: To keep it company
Vince: Quite. I believe a solitary coelacanth is a sorry site.
Karen: That's quite sad really - imagine those few lonely coelacanth's wandering the deep, wondering if they're extinct or not.

Vince: Yes but imagine how happy they are when they meet a mate !
Karen: But what if they don't get on ?
Vince: What ? Personality clash you mean ?
Karen: Yes - or maybe just not attractive to each other - gammy gill or a touch of fin-rot perchance.....
Vince: Well I'd have thought that if the perpetuation of the species was at stake....
Karen: Lie back and think of Atlantis !
Vince: Well quite - though I doubt they do it lying down.
Karen: No, I suppose not. I still think it's sad.....
Vince: That's because you've got a soul.
Karen: No, it's a halibut.
Vince: Sorry ?
Karen: I used to have a sole but I lost it, and I couldn't get another one, so I settled for a halibut.
Vince: Are they very different ?
Karen: Well all flatfish look the same to me, but apparently you can tell by the way they swim, a sole swims like this {*Make fishy movement*} whilst a halibut swims like this {*Make another fishy movement* }
Vince: I see. - How did you lose him ?
Karen: I don't know. I went to the tank one day and he - at least I think it was a he - wasn't there.{*Close to tears*} I was ever-so upset. I was very fond of him.
Vince: So you went out and got yourself a halibut - that was very sensible.
Karen: Yes, but I miss him. I mean my halibut is very nice but he's not the same.
Vince: I should go and have a look for your sole if I were you - I'm sure you've only mislaid it - I don't think it's truly lost.

[*Lights fade*]

Scene ** 5 : Friends ?

[*Lights Rise*]

[*Karen is sitting next to Linda, they are both reading magazines*]

Karen: Have you seen this Linda ? {*Points to something in magazine*};
Linda: {*Looking up*}; Well I never did -
Karen: No, neither did I.
Linda: Isn't it strange ?
Karen: Abnormal, I'd say.
Linda: Peculiar at least.
Karen: To say the very least.
Linda: How do they do it ?
Karen: I'm not sure - I haven't finished the article yet.
Linda: Is there a diagram ?
Karen: {*Flips a couple of pages*}; Doesn't look like it -
Linda: Annoying that - when they don't print diagrams.
Karen: It's getting more and more common that is.
Linda: Is it ? Good grief - I wouldn't think there were many people that could do it !
Karen: No - not that. I mean leaving out diagrams - they're doing it all the time these days. Not like the good old days.
Linda: No, you always got a diagram in the good old days.

[*Pause*]

Karen: I mean how are you supposed to do it without a diagram - you could end up making a right pig's-ear of it couldn't you.
Linda: Absolutely - Not that I'm sure I'd want to do it anyway.
Karen: I'm not at all sure I *could* do it, and certainly not without the diagram.
Linda: Nor me. D'you think *they* find it easy ?
Karen: It looks like they're finding it pretty easy - doesn't it ?
Linda: {*Squints at page*} It's difficult to tell -
Karen: Without the diagram
Linda: Just so. Do you think *that* one goes under that one or over the top of it ?
Karen: Well, without the diagram I'd only be guessing, but I'd say it goes over the first one, has a half-twist and comes back under the second one, possibly with a little loop in it.
Linda: That's a bit complicated isn't it ? Is it really worth it ?
Karen: Hard to say -
Linda: Without the diagram
Karen: Quite.
Linda: Did you try last week's ?
Karen: I got bored half way through -

Linda: That can be a problem - I find that - You think everything's going fine then all of a sudden you find you're getting bored - can be a bit of a shock that.

Karen: Yes, it's never nice getting bored when you're not expecting it.

Linda: No, you're right, if you're going to get bored, you expect it's going to take quite a while, sort-of creep up on you, you don't really expect to suddenly find yourself bored.

Karen: Absolutely. I remember being bored on the train once - and I normally quite like train journeys, but there I was coming into Watford Junction -

Linda: Oh, surely not. You can't be bored at Watford Junction, I mean it's just not the place.

Karen: Well that's what I thought, but as I stand here -

Linda: You're sitting -

Karen: Alright, as I sit here - there I was bored - In Watford Junction !

Linda: Amazing. I mean there's usually so much going on. Difficult to imagine getting bored with all that activity going on around you - and in a train too.

[Pause]

Karen: I wasn't bored for very long though. I remembered I'd got Harris's Guide to Flatfish in my bag, so I started reading that. I was so engrossed I missed Harrow and Wealdstone completely and had to carry on to Euston.

Linda: Oh very nasty.

Karen: That wasn't the half of it. I thought I'd get the Tube back to Harrow on the Hill

Linda: Very sensible -

Karen: Well yes it would've been, except I got on the wrong line at King's Cross, and ended up in Ladbroke Grove before I realised something was up.

Linda: Oh dear. Didn't you look at the map ?

Karen: I'm colour-blind. And I left Harris's Guide to Flatfish somewhere on the Met.

Linda: Isn't it always the way. Find a really good book and you go and leave it on the underground, I do it all the time. There must be half the Bodleian Library wandering aimlessly round subterranean London.

Karen: But you try going to Lost Property. They've never found it.

Linda: Oh, they found one of mine - but it cost me the earth to get it back.

Karen: Really ? Why was that ?

Linda: Well it was a quid for the book, but another £42 for the fares it had clocked up. It had been all over the place; Epping, Upminster, Tooting Bec.

Karen: Not Tooting Bec.

Linda: That's what I said. But they had all the tickets to prove it. I was powerless to protest. So I just leave them now and hope they don't track me down.

Karen: They will in the end - from the library ticket.

Linda: Ah. That's why I use an alias.

Karen: That's a good idea - I'd not thought of that. What d'you call yourself ?

Linda: Brian Smith. I got his name out of the telephone book.

Karen: But he's a *man*.

Linda: So I believe.

Karen: Don't they notice - that you're not ?

Linda: Not what ?
Karen: Not a man.
Linda: Oh. No. I wear a moustache.
Karen: And that fools them ?
Linda: It has so far. I think London Underground must think they've got a plague of Gideons at the moment, I've left at least seven Bibles on the District and Circle in the past couple of weeks.
Karen: Have you got one at the moment ?
Linda: No, I lost my last one yesterday.
Karen: That's a pity, I had a spare one this morning, but I gave it to Vincent.
Linda: Never mind, I'd only got Revelations to do, and I'm not awfully keen on Revelations. Too many trumpets. I get enough trumpets with Harry's band practice. Last time I read Revelations every time Harry hit a top "C" I expected the four horsemen to come charging through the door.
Karen: You poor thing. Tetrequinophobia can be very nasty.
Linda: I know, I couldn't watch The Royal International for years. Even the Dressage put me into a spin. *[pause]* Oh well, I must go and do some shopping.
Karen: Um, so must I. I don't know what we're going to have for dinner tonight.
Linda: We had a lovely bit of Dover Sole last night.
Karen: Dover Sole ?
Linda: Yes, well at least that's what Harry called it, and he should know, he caught it. I must say I was surprised at him catching a Dover Sole in Milton Keynes.

[Lights fade as Karen emits a wail]

Scene ** 6 : An Attempt at Atonement

[Lights rise] [*Linda is talking to her husband Harry*]

Linda: She was ever so upset, apparently it was a pet. I wish I'd known she had a pet sole, I'd never have mentioned our meal if I'd known.

Harry: Pretty silly thing to keep as a pet if you ask me. How was I to know. It didn't have a lead on it or anything.

Linda: Well even you thought it unusual to find a Dover Sole in the Grand Union Canal.

Harry: He didn't look very happy anyway.

Linda: Well he wouldn't would he ? Poor little fish; first he gets lost, then he's forced to swim about in the grimy old Grand Union, then he gets your hook in his mouth, and finishes up as a delicious meal for three. Wasn't his day really was it ?

Harry: I'm sorry. But I'd only got Harris's Guide to Fish of the Grand Union Canal on me, and as he wasn't in it, I thought I might be able to claim some sort of reward.

Linda: It's a bit of a strain on a relationship you know, eating a friend's pet. How would you like it if she saw Brutus wandering about and turned him into chilli con carne.

Harry: {Smirking} Chilli con *canem* surely.

Linda: It's no laughing matter.

Harry: Linda; Rottweiler and chips is not a recognised delicacy, Dover Sole *is*, there is a difference.

Linda: You try telling Karen that. And for heaven's sake, if you catch a halibut stick it in a bowl with a tub of salt and give it back to her.

Harry: Oh, she's got a halibut now has she ? I like halibut.

Linda: Don't you go near that halibut. To eat one pet could be considered unfortunate, eating two

Harry: Don't worry. Anyway, how do we know that it was definitely *her* sole ?

Linda: How many soles d'you think there are floating round Milton Keynes ?

Harry: He wasn't floating. That's the last thing flatfish do -

Linda: I suppose it's the last thing most fish do; it hardly detracts from the fact however that the Dover Sole population of Milton Keynes is small at the best of times - in fact I would venture to suggest that you've just reduced it by 100% !

Harry: He did taste good though didn't he ?

Linda: That's very true - did you like the champagne sauce I made ?

Harry: Delicious. Was it real champagne ?

Linda: Cheek ! Of course it was. Bollinger '65

Harry: Blimey - that's a bit extravagant isn't it, I'd've thought half a bottle of Pomagne would have been quite adequate.

Linda: It didn't cost us anything after all, John brought it. I think he enjoyed the meal too.

Harry: Oh yes, definitely. - I believe his interview went very well.

Linda: Oh good, he'll be much happier once he's in gainful employment, he's been very down ever since that partnership with his dad fell through.

Harry: I know, he'd rather set his heart on Upper Volta, but I believe he may do quite a bit of travelling with the ministry of whatever-it-is.

Linda: Which ministry is it ?

Harry: I'm not sure, but apparently his middle name helped him get the job, {*slight pause*} - so it's probably Defence.

Linda: Really, I must look it up in Harris's Guide to Government Departments.

Harry: Is a Ministry the same thing as a Government Department.

Linda: Within the meaning of the act, I believe so. They're all in there anyway, with a supplement for quangos.

Harry: We ought to introduce John to Karen - not mentioning that he partook of the meal of course - I think they'd get on rather well, don't you.

Linda: As long as that father of his doesn't come back and bore everybody with tropical diseases.

Harry: I'm not so bothered when he just talks about them, it's when he *gives* the damned things to you that I get annoyed. Beri beri was bad enough but I really do draw the line at Lassa fever.

Linda: Yes, he has a strange idea of what makes a nice present, and it seems churlish to turn them down. I wish just for once he'd bring back something we could put on the mantelpiece, rather than having to spend six weeks in an isolation hospital.

Harry: Well I'll speak to John, and you arrange something with Karen; I'm sure they'd hit it off.

Linda: That's if Karen's still speaking to me. Perhaps I ought to give her a little present by way of apologising for eating her sole.

Harry: That's a good idea - how about Harris's Guide to Flatfish ?

Linda: She's already got it, oh, hold on, she left it on the underground, yes, that'd be ideal.

Harry: {*Looks at watch*} D'you think Dougall's is still open ?

Linda: {*Looks at watch*} Er - yes, I should think so.

Harry: Right, I'll pop out and get a copy

[*Lights fade*]

Scene ** 7 : Guidance

[Lights rise] [*Peter is behind the desk in a bookshop, Harry enters*]

Harry: Ye Gods, it's bitter out there.
Peter: "When icicles hang by the wall, and Dick the shepherd blows his nail"
Harry: "And Tom bears logs into the hall"
Peter: "And milk comes frozen home in pail"
Harry: "When blood be nip'd and ways be foul"
Peter: "Then nightly sings the staring owl"
Harry: "Tu-who; Tu-whit, tu-who - a merry note"
Peter: "And greasy Joan doth keel the pot"
Harry: I couldn't have put it better myself
Peter: No, he could turn a phrase could the old Bard.
Harry: The Winter's Tale if I'm not mistaken -
Peter: You are mistaken - Love's Labour's Lost
Harry: Good Lord, is it really ? - I thought that was "I know a bank whereon...."
Peter: ... "the wild thyme blows", ... no that's Midsummer Night's Dream.
Harry: Well I'll be jiggered, I could have sworn that was L cubed.
Peter: Nope. Sound's like you're in need of Harris's Guide to quotations from Shakespeare
Harry: I didn't realise there was one.
Peter: One of their newer titles. It's a companion guide to their Guides to characters from Shakespeare, plots from Shakespeare and their glossary of incomprehensible words from Shakespeare. You can have all four for the inclusive price of thirty pounds.
Harry: Does that include the nice little box that they all fit into until you've used them too often and they get fatter and won't fit in anymore.
Peter: It does.
Harry: In that case I shall have to seriously consider purchasing them. I didn't realise Harris's had so many new titles.
Peter: Most people don't. If I may make so bold, could I suggest your purchasing Harris's Guide to Harris's Guides, only eight pounds with an inexpensive monthly update as an optional extra.
Harry: I think I may have to. However, first things first, I'd better get the one I came in for before I consider any subsequent purchases.
Peter: Ah, so it's a Harris's Guide that you require.
Harry: Naturally.
Peter: Which one is it ? Let me guess -
Harry: I doubt you'll get it -
Peter: Um, Plantagenet Kings of England ?
Harry: Not even close.
Peter: Rockets and Missiles of the Non-aligned States - excluding Cuba ?
Harry: Miles away.

Peter: Tropical diseases of the Upper Volta

Harry: No, though funnily enough we've already got that one.

Peter: Thermionic valves upto and including the photo-multiplier.

Harry: No, no, no - You're getting worse !

Peter: Oh dear, hold on then, Marsupials and monotremes ?

Harry: Warmer, but still not very close.

Peter: Let's see - would I be right in thinking that we are talking Animal Kingdom ?

Harry: Indeed you would.

Peter: And the animals we're looking for, they are vertebrates ?

Harry: Quite so.

Peter: That's a relief, I hate all those slugs, worms etcetera. Good so let me think - fish ?

Harry: Very good.

Peter: Now then, what sort of fish ? Quite a tricky one this - a lot of titles to go at.

Harry: Well I'll give you that they're not freshwater - that should narrow it down a bit.

Peter: Oh, don't make it too easy. Tropical cartilaginous predators ?

Harry: Ooh no, well off beam.

Peter: I've got it, I know - Flatfish.

Harry: Well done. I didn't think you'd get it that quickly.

Peter: I should've guessed really.

Harry: How were you to know.

Peter: No, I should have guessed, because we're completely out of them. We've had a hell of a run on them.

Harry: Oh dear, I really wanted it quite urgently.

Peter: I am sorry - especially as you were in urgent need of it, going fishing are you ?

Harry: No, it's for a friend.

Peter: A very nice present if I may say so.

Harry: Well after we ate her sole, we felt like we ought to make amends.

Peter: You ate her what ?!

Harry: Sole, Dover sole. It was a pet. But we didn't realise at the time.

Peter: Dear, dear, fancy accidentally eating a friend's pet. I bet that went down really well.

Harry: It did actually, especially with the champagne sauce and brazed aubergines.

Peter: That isn't really what I meant, but never mind.

Harry: Oh I see. No she wasn't very happy at all. Hence the little peace offering.

Peter: I quite understand. Do you not think however that it might be a bit tactless ?

Harry: What ?

Peter: Well, with a sole being a flatfish, buying her a book on the subject might be rather like rubbing salt into the wound, don't you think ?

Harry: Oh, crikey, yes, I hadn't thought of that -

Peter: Especially when she gets to the section on soles - I can envisage tears, can't you ?

Harry: Absolutely. Thanks for pointing it out. Oh dear, what can we get her, I still think we ought to get her a present.

Peter: Oh certainly you should. What other interests does she have ?

Harry: I don't really know, she's Linda's - my wife's - friend you see, I don't know her that well at all. Ah, hold on, she bought us a very nice bottle of wine once, so perhaps...

Peter: One of Harris's wine guides perchance ?

Harry: It would seem quite reasonable wouldn't it.

Peter: Was it French ?

Harry: Was what French ?

Peter: The wine she bought you.

Harry: Oh good Lord, I don't know, I know absolutely nothing about wine. It was red - if that's any help.

Peter: I suppose it's a start -

Harry: And it wasn't fizzy.

Peter: Not many red wines are sir.

Harry: Aren't they ? Well you learn something new every day.

Peter: Indeed. Well I suppose you could buy all the Harris's guides to the various countries' red wines, but I'm afraid that would set you back about £80.

Harry: Stone me, we only ate her sole, we didn't machete her grandmother to death.

Peter: I'm very glad to hear it; even Harris's vast range might be hard pushed to ameliorate someone for the fatal hacking of a close relation.

Harry: I've got it - I know what to get her

Peter: I'm all ears - please tell.

Harry: She's quite religious -

Peter: Harris's Guide to Old Testament Prophets ?

Harry: No - The Bible.

Peter: Which bit of the Bible ?

Harry: All of it.

Peter: All of it ! Harris's don't make a guide to all of the Bible, it would be huge, they split it into sections.

Harry: I don't want Harris's Guide to it - I want IT - a Bible - as written by God - with help from various scribes, prophets and saints down the ages. The world's number one best selling book, or so I believe.

Peter: I'm not sure, I think Chairman Mao's little red book is in the running you know.

Harry: Yes I suppose it must be - well how about it - would you kindly supply me with a Bible - King James authorised version please, none of this modern rubbish.

Peter: Ah, I see, which edition would you like ?

Harry: I have a choice ?

Peter: Indeed you do.

Harry: Which do you recommend ?

Peter: Well, Harris's do a very good one.

Harry: I should have guessed. Ok, fine, I'll take it.

[Lights fade]

Scene ** 8 : Fin de siècle ou fin de cercle ?

[*Lights rise*] [*Peter enters*]

Peter: Hello ? Anybody there
Carol: [*offstage*] Hold on, won't be a minute.
Peter: Is that you Carol ?
Carol: [*offstage*] No, it's Mother Theresa of Calcutta.
Peter: Thought so.

[*Carol enters*]

Carol: Hello Peter, how's things ?
Peter: Fine. And you ?
Carol: I've got an aching back, a sore throat and I think I've got a cold coming on, the budgie died this morning, I crashed the car on the way to work and that broke the new vase I'd bought for my mother's birthday. Apart from that everything's hunky-dory.
Peter: Good grief.
Carol: Oh and my husband thinks that he's lost his soul.
Peter: Come again.
Carol: But I think it's only mislaid.
Peter: S.O.U.L. or S.O.L.E. ?
Carol: What ?
Peter: Has your husband lost his inner soul or a pet fish ?
Carol: What a ridiculous question. His inner soul of course.
Peter: Not quite as ridiculous as you might think, but never mind. Has he any idea where he lost it ?
Carol: Possibly at the doctor's surgery, but you know what Brian's like, it could have been anywhere.
Peter: Well when did he notice that it was missing ?
Carol: Ah, sometime between us getting married and today.
Peter: And you've been married how long ?
Carol: Fifteen years this April.
Peter: Sounds well and truly lost to me.
Carol: No, I'm sure it's only mislaid.
Peter: Anyway, I don't particularly want to spend this evening discussing Brian's soullessness. I mean if you will go and marry someone from the ministry of whatever-it-is what do you expect ?
Carol: But he didn't work for the ministry when we married.
Peter: Didn't he ? I thought all those ministry bods were born there.
Carol: Don't be facetious Peter, it doesn't become you.
Peter: Alright then, as you seem determined to discuss him, what *did* he do when you married him ?

Carol: He was a taxidermist.

Peter: Oh lovely.

Carol: It was a very interesting job. You ought to have seen some of the things he stuffed.

Peter: I am eternally grateful that that particular pleasure has eluded me.

Carol: No really. He even did a coelacanth once.

Peter: Please Carol, no more fish. It's been one of those days.

Carol: I won't attempt to understand that last statement; I think the rhinoceros was probably the largest thing that he did, but by no means the trickiest.

Peter: Do tell - what was the trickiest ?

Carol: Difficult to say really, I know the anaconda was pretty difficult.

Peter: You surprise me, I'd have thought snakes were pretty easy, just like stuffing one of those sausages you put at the bottom of the door to keep the drafts out.

Carol: Well normally they are, but this one had a fully-grown capybara inside him, which made things a little awkward.

Peter: Well yes, I can imagine it would.

Carol: Actually, I think the giant squid was probably his most challenging - all things considered.

Peter: A giant squid.

Carol: Yes, he had a hell of a job getting it to stand up straight. They have a natural tendency to flop have squids; floppy things always posed a bit of a problem, yes, I remember now, he'd always get into a bad mood when he'd got a jelly-fish to do.

Peter: Well if he was so good at stuffing things, why on earth did he go and get a job at the ministry ?

Carol: He developed an allergy to formaldehyde - which of course is extensively used in taxidermy.

Peter: Of course.

Carol: Yes, it affected his use of the third person singular.

Peter: An unusual malady.

Carol: Indeed, then it spread to the second person, that was very nasty, kept using thou and thine in all the wrong places. People began to think he was a Yorkshireman !

Peter: Great Scott, that would be terrible.

Carol: And his doctor warned him that if he carried on regardless he'd probably just end up with the first person plural, which would make him sound like Queen Victoria.

Peter: I trust he got over it.

Carol: Yes, once he left the formaldehyde alone he improved rapidly, though he occasionally has a relapse even now.

Peter: Well I never did. And how long ago was all this ?

Carol: Oh, ten years or so.

Peter: About the time we first met then. And did he still have his soul then ?

Carol: That's a good point - yes he did - but now I come to think about it, that's roughly when it started slipping away.

Peter: Slipping away ? I thought you said he'd lost it, which suggests a sort-of abandonment in one piece, so to speak, whereas "slipping away" suggests a gradual decline over a period of time.

Carol: That's just what it was like.

Peter: Well this puts a completely different complexion on the whole matter. Sounds to me like he'd got a leak.

Carol: A leak ?

Peter: Yes, a bit like salt pouring out of a - well out of a salt container, he must have left a trail of jettisoned soul all over the place.

Carol: Like a human slug. Ugh !

Peter: It'd be a hell of a job trying to get it all back again now.

Carol: Do you think it would help if he left the ministry.

Peter: Well it might.

Carol: The trouble is he doesn't seem to mind that he's lost it.

Peter: Oh dear, that sounds very serious.

Carol: And he loves his job.

Peter: Contradiction in terms there. He can't love anything if he hasn't got a soul.

Carol: I wouldn't have thought that the ministry of whatever-it-is really counts as an acceptable object of affection.

Peter: Oh, I don't know, it's a start. Perhaps he hasn't lost all of it after all.

Carol: Oh, I hope so. I think I ought to encourage him. See if I can coax it back.

Peter: You could try.

Carol: I ought to be more loving towards him, and

Peter: Yes, go on say it, I can feel it coming

Carol: You know what I'm going to say don't you

Peter: Us.

Carol: Yes.

Peter: The parting of the ways.

Carol: { *Crying gently* } I think it's for the best.

Peter: { *Sadly* } It's your choice.

Carol: I know.

Peter: It always has been.

Carol: I know. It's not easy.

Peter: We'd better avoid each other then.

Carol: I suppose so. { *Slight pause* } I'll miss you.

Peter: I'll miss you. I'd better just go, I suppose.

Carol: No lingering farewells, it would be a disaster -

Peter: Just so. Goodbye Carol.

Carol: Goodbye Peter.

[*Peter is leaving*]

Peter: { *Pause* } *Never the twain shall meet.*

[***Blackout***] [***Curtain***]