

CHRISTMAS 2002 PLAY

CHARACTERS

Bill, the works foreman – Stressed and stropky

Harry, the planner – Kind, soothing, wise (type of Holy Spirit)

Kevin, draughtsman – Young and green

Sharon, tea lady – A gossip and a bit of a tart

(We are in the messy, busy office of a small engineering company. A sign on the wall reads: “You don’t have to be mad to work here”, and someone has crossed out “don’t”.)

(HARRY is working at a computer. KEVIN is working on a drawing, but at the start of the play he’s being served tea by SHARON, from a trolley laden with elderly cups and an ancient steel teapot.)

(BILL, wearing overalls and a hard hat, storms into the office, slams door. Slumps into a chair, throws hat down in frustration. Kevin looks round in alarm, Sharon in amusement. No reaction from Harry.)

*** SFX: Sound of workshop machinery shutting down. Lights up as soon as sound starts.*

BILL That just about does it! I’ve really had enough this time. I can’t go on running this useless place any longer!

HARRY That’s the fifth time this week you’ve said you’re giving up.

BILL And this time I mean it. I’ve just had to stop the production line, *again*. Shall I tell you why? (Waits for reaction, but gets none.) Well I’ll tell you anyway. Although you can probably guess. We’ve just run out of boiler scraper backplates.

HARRY Don’t panic, they’re on order.

BILL Don’t panic? What else is there to do, with all the machines stopped and customers baying at my heels? And what use is it to me, if they’re stuck in the back of a lorry at Scratchwood Services? I need them here, now.

KEVIN They don’t seem to be very reliable, this supplier... um, what’s their name again? (Instantly regrets speaking up, as this sets off another storm from BILL)

BILL Not very reliable? You can say that again, laddio. It’s Grace’s and they’re a complete shower. Like, last month they delivered a short order of clobber pins. Then back in June they sent a whole truckload of curly bewlies instead of straight ones.

KEVIN I thought they were supposed to be curly.

BILL Not the 17B’s, you dolt. The 16A’s are the curly ones. How long have

you been here now, and you still haven't figured out your bewlies.

SHARON What you need is lovely cup of tea from Auntie Sharon. Strong and black, just like your bad temper. (She pours it and passes the cup to BILL)

BILL (Tastes tea, pulls a face) Yours would be too, if you had to put up with tea like this. (Returns it to SHARON, who retreats sulkily to the tea trolley.) Anyway, stop changing the subject! There's a workshop full of idle men out there, and as usual guess who gets the task of sorting it out? No-one else seems to get landed with the problems round here, and it's not me that causes them.

SHARON (Inspects fingernails) I seem to remember some problem with a certain works foreman attempting a certain – shall we say – unauthorised alteration to the ratchet pummeler, that made the grobbulator go down for two days.

BILL Yes, well, that was completely different. And anyway, I was trying to keep production going, you know, trying to do my job. Not that I'm saying it was me that adjusted the pummeler. Just, if it had been, it would have been because I was trying to do my job properly.

SHARON (straightens cups on the trolley) Good morning, English speaking world, and welcome to your new definition of the word "properly". (KEVIN suppresses a snigger)

BILL (Glares at KEVIN) It's him in there; he's the real problem. (Indicates unseen BOSS in adjacent office) He set this whole place up in the first place, and now he expects me to run it for him. How can I, when he keeps using tinpot suppliers like Grace's? They're always late, substandard goods, poor workmanship. Constantly falling short of the mark: (to HARRY) you've said so yourself. I mean, how many times have they let us down this year?

HARRY It's not my job to keep a record of wrongs.

BILL Well, someone needs to start counting the cost. And it's about time somebody spoke up around here. I'm going right in there to tell the boss how useless they are. (Doesn't actually move, though)

HARRY There is quite a bit of history involved, you know.

KEVIN History? What do you mean?

HARRY You've not been here long enough, or you'd know the boss has a deep connection with Grace's, going back an awful long way. The Graces were desperately poor and trying to make good of themselves. They put in a fantastic amount of effort, scraped together whatever they could, and somehow managed to set up their own business. The boss knew them back then, an old family connection, and he wanted to help them, but they were too proud. Anyway, just after they managed to get up and running, when things were finally starting to go their way, disaster struck. Their beautiful baby boy, their pride and joy, Ishmael his name

was, became terribly ill and died. They found out later, his heart had never formed properly.

SHARON Poor love, he was such a cute little thing. Full of smiles and mischief. I always used to think, looking into those bonny blue eyes, that he was made for great things. But whether good or bad, I was never too sure.

BILL OK, so we have beautiful baby boy born to parents as poor as church mice, gets ill, dies, oh dear, how sad. So when does the cavalry arrive?

HARRY Just coming to that bit. The boss was watching all this, seeing their grief and how desperately they wanted – *needed* – a child. And time was against them; they were getting on in years. So he sent them his own baby boy to bring up as their own.

BILL (aghast) He did *what*? But – didn't he love the child himself? Didn't he want to keep him for himself? What sort of father would do that, send his baby son away to be raised by people who were hostile towards him and everything he represented?

SHARON Yeah, why did he do that? I never did quite get it.

HARRY Well, you don't quite understand the relationship they had. It's not that they were hostile towards him, not exactly; it's more that they were too proud, too independent. They had to do things their own way, and earn their own security, so that no-one could say they owed them anything. But they took the child...

SHARON (interrupting) Joshua, *his* name was. Now he had a fierce look about him, as if to say, "Don't try and outsmart me; I know more than you can possibly imagine." But so good-natured. Nothing special to look at, mind; but they still doted on him.

HARRY (regaining the initiative) They took the child and brought him up as their own. He always knew who his real father was, and wanted to follow in his footsteps, and do the same work he saw him do. But he was willing to bide his time, and he went into the Grace family business, driving the delivery van for them.

BILL Ah, so that's it, is it? Big daddy likes to keep precious son in a job by giving his business to precious son's employer, even if they are rubbish at running their affairs. Well, more fool him.

HARRY Wait, we haven't reached the end yet. Grace's, as you so eloquently pointed out, were not particularly meticulous at running their company. Their lack of attention to detail also included failing to get the van serviced. So one day, Joshua went out to do the daily rounds, applied the brakes, and nothing happened. (Becomes emotional at the memory) There was a horrible crash, and he died.

BILL Oh, my Lord. Anyone else hurt?

SHARON Two others died with him. Turned out they were robbers.

BILL And where did this happen?

HARRY At The Cross, top of the hill just outside the city.

BILL (Takes a moment to let this sink in) Well, that just about takes the biscuit. After all they've done, all the hurt and pain they must have caused him, he still keeps pouring out the goodies for them. I just don't get it.

KEVIN (Suddenly wheels round and speaks up confidently) Well, I do. (Then hesitates to continue, as if sensing hostility.)

HARRY Go on, Kevin. Don't be afraid.

KEVIN He's done just as much for me, too. When I was a little kid, I got cancer. Desperately needed an operation, but the doctors said there was nothing they could do. Somehow, I don't know how, the boss sorted it all out. Something happened, and I got better. I remember him coming to visit me. Then a few years later, when I was in my rebellious phase, a few of my mates persuaded me to go with them to his house. We stood outside and shouted things, just stupid stuff about what a soft touch he was, and that. And I'll never forget this: he came out of the house, walked right up to me – like this (mimes with BILL; puts hands on BILL's shoulders) and said: "Just let your yes be yes, and your no, no." It was like lights came on in my head and I realised what nonsense it was that I'd been yelling at him. (Turns to go back to desk.)

SHARON Can't really imagine you in a rebellious phase, honey.

KEVIN (Turns to BILL again) And have you forgotten so quickly what he did for you? I'm not just talking about overlooking the ratchet pummeler incident. He paid your debt, remember that? When you got in all sorts of trouble, bailiffs coming to wipe you out – "skin you alive", I think that was the expression you used. And *he* stepped in and bailed you out. You have a short memory, Bill.

BILL Well, yes, maybe, but that doesn't mean I have to cow-tow to him for ever, does it?

HARRY It's a token of how much he cares about you, Bill.

KEVIN Just like he cared about me when I was sick.

SHARON And about the Graces.

BILL (Starting to bluster) He's a fool. He *is* a soft touch. I think you were right, maybe, Kevin.

KEVIN He may be a fool, but he's no soft touch. All I know is, he's generous and open-hearted.

BILL (Sarcastic) Just wants everyone to love him, is that it?

HARRY Not just that, Bill. Your daughter used to work at Grace's, didn't she?

BILL Yes, but what's that got to do with anything?

HARRY Did you know, she was due to make the delivery run that day?

KEVIN In the van with the faulty brakes.

HARRY And Joshua said, no, leave it to me, I'll do it for you. It's my job.

KEVIN He knew the brakes were bad.

HARRY And he died.

SHARON In place of your daughter.

BILL (Shocked into silence for a moment) You mean – my Zoë – he did that – for her? If anything happened to Zoë, I don't know what I'd do. I'd die. She means everything to me.

HARRY (Quietly) The boss knows that, Bill.

BILL So – did *he* know that Joshua was going to do that for Zoë? For – for me? (Sees the others nod.) Did he – did he *tell* him to do that for her?

HARRY Not just for her, but for all of us. And it all started the day he sent his baby son.

BILL Well, thank God he did! (ALL agree)

SHARON (suddenly) Well, I can't hang about here all day gossiping. Look, it's my home time!

KEVIN Blimey, so it is. Come on, you guys – race you to the bus stop.

HARRY Bill, the stock controller's just sent me an email. Your boiler scraper backplates are in.

BILL (all enthusiastic) Fantastic, just in the nick of time. Right, that's it, I'm gonna get that grobbulator going again tonight if it's the last thing I do! Night all – oh, and merry Christmas! (Grabs hard hat and exit rapidly)
** *Blackout* ** (Exeunt ALL in different directions)